

Water District hosts training drill

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YORK — Local agencies on Oct. 11 participated in a successful emergency response hazardous material drill that simulated the release of anhydrous ammonia gas at the Josiah Chase Water Filtration Plant.

The purpose behind the simulation was to assess the York Water District's hazardous materials, or hazmat, plan and the response and coordination capabilities of local emergency organizations, including the York fire departments, Portsmouth Naval Shipyard HazMat Response Team, and York Police Department.

The York County Emergency Management Agency (EMA) and Local Emergency Planning Committee (LEPC) were also present, as well as representatives from the Maine State Police and York Hospital.

According to York Water District Superintendent Donald Neumann, a drill of this magnitude only happens every couple of years.

"Initially, we do tabletop drills where all the parties come together and discuss things and go through scenarios," Neumann said. "With this type of drill, we actually call into 911. It goes through York Dispatch and the Fire Departments and Navy Yard are contacted."

Treatment plant manager Ryan Lynch, who put the scenario together and helps make sure the plan is kept up to date, said the plant has only small amounts of anhydrous ammonia gas and called any spill of the substance "very unlikely," but said drills like these are essential.

"Anything you can do to help improve the response to any emergency is a great thing," he said, estimating 50 individuals participated in the exercise and more than 100 could respond in a real situation. "In a functional drill, you can learn quite a bit and help emergency providers learn about the site. It's a win-win for everybody."

Lynch said the drill also simulated two missing people, one of whom was a dummy that weighed 200 pounds, which enabled the responders to not only test the logistics of dealing with such a situation, but also engaged the various lines of communication necessary in saving lives.

The simulation included an automated reverse 911 call, which sent out a live test message to nearby residents who were asked to respond if they received it.

"It went really well, but one area of improvement that can be made is in the communication plans," said Lynch. "It is not that unusual a problem when you are working with six to 10 agencies."

York Village Fire Chief Chris Balentine, who coordinated the overall effort of the emergency response for the drill, said the exercise was an important opportunity to share ideas and work with hazmat equipment. "The (drill) enables us to see possibilities of doing it better," he said.

Bob Bohlmann, county director for the York County EMA, said the drill went above and beyond federal requirements.

"The York Water District is doing the right thing," he said, adding that he considered the exercise closer to a larger, full-scale simulation. "It is one thing to discuss things around a table and another to actually take the time and test the plan out."

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