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Using Witt Report, Pennsylvania Better Prepared for Winter's Worst

Harrisburg – While weather forecasters are predicting a mild winter, top officials in the administration of Governor Edward G. Rendell today said Pennsylvania will be ready no matter what emergency Mother Nature creates.

Using the recommendations made in an independent report that was produced this year following a February snow storm, as well as direction from the Governor himself, the Department of Transportation, Pennsylvania State Police and the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency have worked to enhance procedures and improve the state's emergency response system.

"We wanted to find out what we needed to do to improve following the Valentine's Day storm and we found out with the help of James Lee Witt Associates," said Governor Rendell. "PennDOT, state police and PEMA have worked very diligently to take corrective action to ensure that Pennsylvania's response to all types of emergencies will be more than capable in the future."

While not minimizing the February storm, the Governor said Pennsylvania has routinely responded quickly and professionally to emergencies that happened on his watch.

There have been 19 gubernatorial and 10 presidential declarations in response to serious threats to public health and safety since Governor Rendell arrived in Harrisburg in 2003. The declarations were issued so the commonwealth could help people and businesses during floods, tornados, winter storms, winter fuel delivery problems, even for Hurricane Katrina.

In the past five years, all 67 Pennsylvania counties have been impacted at least once. In every instance, PEMA, at the Governor's direction, was directly involved in supporting the initial disaster response, as well as managing the disaster recovery efforts. During that time, at least 75,000 individuals have received disaster aid. Additionally, more than \$770 million has been paid in federal and state disaster assistance to home owners, businesses and governments.

At a news conference today, PEMA director General Robert P. French, Transportation Secretary Allen D. Biehler and State Police Commander Col. Jeffery B. Miller outlined the state's preparation for winter and beyond.

French said PEMA has:

- Developed procedures to escalate the staffing level within the state's emergency operations center when there is advanced warning of major weather events, like the February storm;
- Met current federal requirements for National Incident Management System (NIMS) compliance; and
- Filled key management positions within the agency, such as appointing a new director of the Bureau of Operations and Training; creating a new Bureau of 9-1-1 Programs and naming a director; and creating a new deputy director of administration position.

PEMA has also received interim approval for its organization plan, and it successfully conducted the agency's first open house and job fair where the State Civil Service Commission tested more than 100 interested applicants.

Several recommendations address on-going agency initiatives or work. One recommendation is the adoption of a resource and logistics software program that will help PEMA manage and track state, county and local capabilities.

"We have met with several of our neighboring states to explore what they are doing and have asked the Office of Administration to review available products," French said. "By the end of this year, we plan to select a package to address improvements in incident reporting and add a comprehensive resource management tool.

Miller said state police created an internal working group to address Witt's recommendations. Based on the group's findings, the department has:

- Created the position of department watch officer to monitor all state police activities during emergency situations and to ensure that the same information is provided to state police commanders at all levels, including other agencies involved in the emergency response. Five watch officers have been appointed and are developing protocols for the PSP watch concept, which also will include the creation of station watch officer positions at each station.
- Installed a state police mobile office computer terminal at PEMA's emergency operations center to give state police personnel working at the emergency operations center full access to all state police computer system information now available to troopers through their in-car computers.
- Distributed BlackBerries to all 16 troop commanders to enhance the sharing of information during emergency situations.
- Developed specific plans with officers from State Police Troop L, Reading, Berks County, and PennDOT representatives for dealing with weather-related traffic incidents on I-78.
- Developed, with PennDOT and PEMA, protocols for closures of interstate highways during weather-related incidents statewide.

Additionally, troopers have completed basic National Incident Management System on-line training. Advanced classroom training is being provided to all officers at the rank of sergeant and higher. The training is to be completed by next September. Integrated emergency management training has been provided to several commanders.

Biehler said changes at PennDOT cover four overarching areas: management and staffing, technology, preparation and communication, and multi-agency cooperation.

"Last Valentine's Day is seared in our memories," Biehler said. "We have carefully studied what went wrong, worked hard to ensure that we can deliver proper snow removal, be aware of road conditions and communicate information clearly and accurately. We focused on the fundamentals of working with the right resources — including staffing and equipment — and using them correctly."

As recommended by the Witt report, PennDOT has adopted new command and control processes following the National Incident Management System, which

provides a clear, organized structure for handling incidents and enhancing the agency's emergency response.

PennDOT also has updated its Web site with a separate travelers' information section. Moreover, the Interstate Condition Hotline will be automatically fed information from PennDOT's Road Condition Reporting System. To help communicate better, PennDOT has adopted a set of common terms to describe road conditions.

Other examples of winter preparation steps PennDOT has taken:

- Increased salaries for temporary winter equipment operators in areas of the state where recruiting has been difficult. This includes the Interstate 81 corridor, areas east of that corridor and the urban areas of the Philadelphia and Pittsburgh regions.
- Contracted with a weather forecasting service to provide automatic notification of approaching storms to PennDOT.
- Started pilot testing of automatic vehicle locators in PennDOT's trucks in Districts 5 and 8 (Lehigh Valley and Harrisburg areas), which will improve PennDOT's situational awareness capability and its ability to re-direct resources as necessary.
- Installed PennDOT, PEMA and State Police incident reporting information at PennDOT's central traffic communications center. All three incident systems are also installed at PEMA and State Police.
- Developed with State Police and PEMA an interstate road closure protocol.
- PennDOT's reviews showed that the problems last winter stemmed from the agency not following established procedures, processes and guidelines.

"This year we are better prepared, have improved staffing and we have systems in place to keep the public informed," Biehler said. "While winter weather will always be unpredictable, we are confident we will deal with winter storms more successfully this year."

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The Rendell administration is committed to creating a first-rate public education system, protecting our most vulnerable citizens and continuing economic investment to support our communities and businesses. To find out more about Governor Rendell's initiatives and to sign up for his weekly newsletter, visit his Web site at: www.governor.state.pa.us.