

WINTER PREPAREDNESS 101

Jamie Herman and Morris Coolidge | State Circuit Riders



Jamie Herman



Morris Coolidge

Well, winter is upon us again here in New York State, and we can only hope it will not be a repeat of last year! The winter of 2013-2014 was difficult at best, and tested the will of our Operations Specialists. It also clearly identified many of our systems vulnerabilities, which we sincerely hope you were able to address during the construction season of 2014.

Last winter our systems and personnel had to adapt, and utilize whatever means and materials were available to address main and service breaks, as well as frozen services, inaccessible valves due to frozen material in the valve boxes, and issues at various facilities with inadequate heating systems. As was mentioned in a previous article, we hope you were able to document any and all deficiencies, and were able to rectify those issues. Now back to reality...we realize there was not enough time or in most cases funding to make the necessary repairs. So, what's the plan for this winter?

Maybe we need to address our most critical areas first. For instance, if one section of your distribution system is more susceptible to main breaks or freezing, then start in that area with a program of cleaning out the valve boxes and exercising the main line valves. If you don't get the entire system completed, at least your problem areas will be operational. Next, were the service lines that froze replaced and buried deeper? With any luck the answer is yes! But again, it is doubtful that time and dollars were sufficient for that type of undertaking. So we need to prepare for another strategy. At this point the best option may be to monitor the weather, keep a list of the service lines affected last year, and in the event we have an extended deep freeze, notify those customers and make arrangements for them to leave the water running to prevent freezing. Obviously this comes with its own set of issues such as billing, and the customers seeing the sun come out so they shut the water off and freeze anyway, but at this point it may be the only option.

Do you have adequate supplies of repair parts? If you haven't already, now would be a good time to be sure you have an ample supply of repair clamps, couplings, pipe, and either meters or meter replacement parts. If we should happen to have another bitterly cold winter these parts may be used up rapidly and may be difficult to acquire should you need them immediately. We don't recommend starting your own warehouse, but you know the history of your system, what and how many issues you generally have, just prepare accordingly.

Is your equipment prepared and operational? Most of your equipment you use all year long, so you know it is ready for duty. However, we are more concerned about that specialty equipment such as a hot water pipe thawing unit or a welder. While the use of a welder to thaw service lines is not recommended, many systems have no choice and still use this technology. In other cases, systems have purchased or borrowed hot water thawing units to more safely provide this valuable service. In either case, we need to make sure the unit is operational, replace any parts that are damaged or significantly worn, and most importantly we need to train our employees on how to safely and properly use the device. The first time you need to use it is not the time to determine it is not operational. We realize your time is limited, but preventative maintenance is critical with these limited use devices. If you borrow or rent equipment when needed, then this would be a good time to update your contact list, make contact, and agree to terms in the event you need to use the equipment this winter.

Last but not least, are you and your employees prepared for the coming weather and potentially very long hours of work? First and foremost should always be your family. Make sure your house is prepared for winter, and that your family knows what actions to take, if necessary, while you are out tending to the needs of the entire community. Next, let's make sure our personal protective equipment is functional and in good condition. One last piece of advice would be to try on that winter weather gear beforehand. It's funny how that stuff seems to shrink just a little from year to year! All joking aside, we need to make sure we have the adequate gear to stay warm and dry during extended exposure during our extremely cold conditions.

Fortunately, the Herman Almanac, which has been 100% accurate every year for the past 43 years with its winter weather forecast, is calling for moderate to average snowfall and temperatures for New York State this winter. But just in case this magnificent publication is wrong, maybe we should all take some action steps to make sure our systems are prepared for the worst, so we can all continue to provide Quality on Tap!!! 💧💧💧

