



PROTECTING THE PUBLIC

During Events Such as the Husky Refinery Fire, Douglas County Emergency Services Works with First Responders from Multiple Jurisdictions

April 26 started as a normal morning for Douglas County Emergency Services. The biggest concern Emergency Management was monitoring concerned a dry spring that presented a potential for wildfires. This Thursday morning was typical for most everyone, including employees and contractors at Husky Superior Refinery. The site was full of employees and skilled tradespeople preparing for a “turnaround” (an industry term for a significant maintenance event) that would close the refinery for several weeks – and keep area hotels and businesses busy.

This day radically changed at about 10 a.m., when a fire was reported at Husky Superior Refinery. As first responders including fire, emergency medical services and police began responding, it was clear this was no small event. Events of this magnitude require coordinating services, mutual aid agreements and other logistical support that is provided by Emergency Management services. Douglas County Emergency Management, directed by Keith Kesler, is the county emergency management service, which also provides contracted emergency management services to the City of Superior. Emergency Management prepares for the unexpected and atypical days through comprehensive planning, training, tabletop simulations and developing relationships with first responders across multiple jurisdictions to respond to emergency events.

By 10:50 a.m., less than 50 minutes after the Husky fire was first reported, the Incident Command system was initiated and the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) in the Douglas County Government Center was fully operational.

The EOC is an emergency event “war room” serving as a central command post for operations and logistics coordination. On this day, the EOC was staffed by representatives from Husky Energy, Douglas County Sheriff’s Department, Superior Police Department, Superior Fire Department, University of Wisconsin-Superior, Public Health, American Red Cross and others. In addition, agencies and services were connected by telephone and video conference, including the National Weather Service, which provided wind and weather models updated every 15 minutes. Simultaneously, Douglas County Department of Health and Human Services initiated an emergency protocol that connected State of Wisconsin Division of Public Health resources to a teleconference system to speed communication between health and environmental experts.



Emergency Management team officials and Husky Energy employees work to address the industrial fire at the Husky Superior Refinery at an April 26 meeting held at the Douglas County Emergency Operations Center.

While the EOC was fully ramped up and operational, Emergency Management also positioned a forward Incident Command (IC) near the refinery by 11:30 a.m. The IC positioned Emergency Management and emergency services leadership closer to the incident, so they could relay requests and orders to the EOC, where they would be implemented. At this time, emergency services had evacuated injured personnel from the refinery and were fighting the fire. Around noon, there was hope that this would not be a catastrophic event, as was the initial concern, since the initial fire was under control. Minutes later, another fire reignited, fueled by a ruptured road asphalt tank.

Since the new fire and its smoke plume were significantly larger, new procedures were rapidly put in place by Emergency Management and first responders. The Incident Command was relocated to an Enbridge facility near the Mariner Retail Business Center and it was becoming clear that an evacuation zone would be needed. Emergency Management, in cooperation with Superior

Fire and Police Departments and members of the Husky Emergency Response Team, established an evacuation zone encompassing a one-mile radius around the refinery and extending 10 miles south by six miles wide east and west.



Douglas County Emergency Management team (from left): Adam Olson, Keith Kesler (director), Deb Stein and Dave Sletten.

The Douglas County Sheriff's Department and Superior Police Department were instrumental in implementing the evacuation in the city and county. To support the community evacuation, emergency services and the American Red Cross coordinated mustering points at Four Corners Elementary School and UW-Superior Yellowjacket Union. Environmental officials from the U.S Environmental Protection Agency and Occupation Safety and Health Administration were also notified and its officials were traveling to the site. Emergency Management also worked with Superior Public Schools to coordinate what schools needed to be closed and with Essentia Health St. Mary's Hospital regarding its temporary closure and evacuation.

While the public faces of this event for the media were Husky Superior Refinery Manager Kollin Schade, Mayor Jim Paine and Chairman Mark Liebaert of the Douglas County Board of Supervisors, providing public information was likewise an important role of Emergency Management. Kaci Lundgren, acting as the Douglas County public information officer, was dispatched for this function, and the media and other interested parties were directed to the Douglas County website, which would serve (and continues serving) as an official repository of announcements and information regarding the explosion.

Throughout the afternoon, Emergency Management coordinated the evacuation of the stated evacuation zone. Later that day, the need for mustering points would change to the need for shelters. In Duluth, the St. Louis County Health Department and the Duluth Entertainment and Convention Center opened a shelter at the DECC, and the American Red Cross prepared Four Corners Elementary School to serve as an overnight shelter. UW-Superior also evacuated students to The College of St. Scholastica in Duluth and closed its campus. As first responders continued to fight the fire, with capacity added by additional fire crews brought in by Husky Energy, Emergency Management continued to monitor weather and focus on providing public information. An information line was established that responded to calls from 4:30 to 10 p.m., when this service

was taken over by Husky Energy. At about 6:45 p.m., the primary fire was extinguished. First responders remained on-site throughout the evening and into late Friday, addressing hot spots and preventing the fire from reigniting. Meanwhile, the evacuation order stayed in place until Friday morning. These monitoring and coordination services continued between Emergency Management, first responders and Husky Energy until the EOC officially closed at 4:30 p.m. on Friday.

This was a challenging event with potential for an outcome much worse. Fortunately, services like Emergency Management exist to help plan and practice for such events. This preplanning and relationship building make it possible for so many first responders (spanning many jurisdictions including towns, villages, cities, counties, states, agencies and private businesses) to work together to meet the needs of a community in crisis. Entities responding included: Amateur Radio Group, American Red Cross, Arrowhead EMS Association, Ashland County Emergency Management, Bayfield County Emergency Management, Burnett County Emergency Management, City of Superior, Superior Fire Department, Superior Police Department, Cloquet Fire/Ambulance, Douglas County, Douglas County Emergency Management, Douglas County Sheriff's Department, Duluth City Emergency Management, Duluth Transit Authority, Essentia Health, Gold Cross Ambulance, Gordon-Wascott Ambulance Service, Hermantown Police Department, Husky Superior Refinery, Iron County Emergency Management, Iron River Ambulance Service, Kwik Trip, Lake County EMS, Minong Ambulance Service, National Weather Service-Duluth, Proctor Police Department, Sawyer County Emergency Management, Solon Springs Fire Department, St. Louis County Emergency Management, St. Louis County Public Health, St. Louis County Rescue Squad, St. Louis County Sheriff's Department, St. Luke's Hospital, State of Wisconsin, Emergency Management, Superior Public Schools, Superior Water, Light & Power, Town of Superior Fire Department, UW-Superior, Veterans Service Office and Wisconsin Department of Transportation.

Many businesses helped to feed and meet the needs of emergency services workers.

In addition to the government agencies and organizations above, many businesses helped to feed and meet the needs of emergency services workers and provide shelter to evacuees. While it's impossible to mention everyone, they include Super One Foods, Walmart in Superior, Black Woods Restaurant Group and many Duluth hotels that opened their doors to evacuees with free or reduced-price lodging. As the refinery continues investigating what happened, Douglas County Emergency Management will also investigate or review its response with emergency services providers and first responders. This process is called an after-action review and will help the department and emergency services determine: what was supposed to happen; what did happen; what worked well during this event; and what opportunities there are for improvement.

This review will help all of these agencies improve their response to emergencies, whether natural disasters, like flooding, fire or an industrial event. 