

DEBRIEF ON JANUARY 20, 2016 SNOW STORM

Results of Review by Emergency Preparedness Council

Stuart A. Freudberg
COG Deputy Executive Director

COG Board of Directors
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Mark Andre, Flickr



Metropolitan Washington
Council of Governments

Background

- The COG Board of Directors tasked the Emergency Preparedness Council (EPC) with reviewing a January 20, 2016 winter storm, which triggered hours-long traffic gridlock, and sharing lessons learned.
- The board also asked the EPC to consider if prior incident management and response recommendations by COG were followed.
 - In January 2011, following a winter storm during the afternoon rush hour that led to widespread gridlock and power outages, a COG Steering Committee on Incident Management and Response (IMR) recommended a number of improvements in preparing for and responding to future storms and incidents.
- The EPC received presentations from the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) and National Weather Service (NWS) in February and the three state departments of transportation (DOTs) in May.

Storm Mobilization

- As part of their presentations to the EPC, the DOTs outlined their storm mobilization processes. The DOTs said:
 - Forecasts play a key role in informing winter storm mobilization levels. These levels vary based on the forecasted accumulation and percentage chance of precipitation as well as pavement temperatures.
 - Mobilizations can take at least 12 hours prior to a storm's forecasted start time. In some cases, more than 90 percent of snow removal equipment is provided by contractors.
 - Pre-treating roadways with ice melting chemicals when pavement temperatures are below freezing is ineffective and can cause slick surfaces.



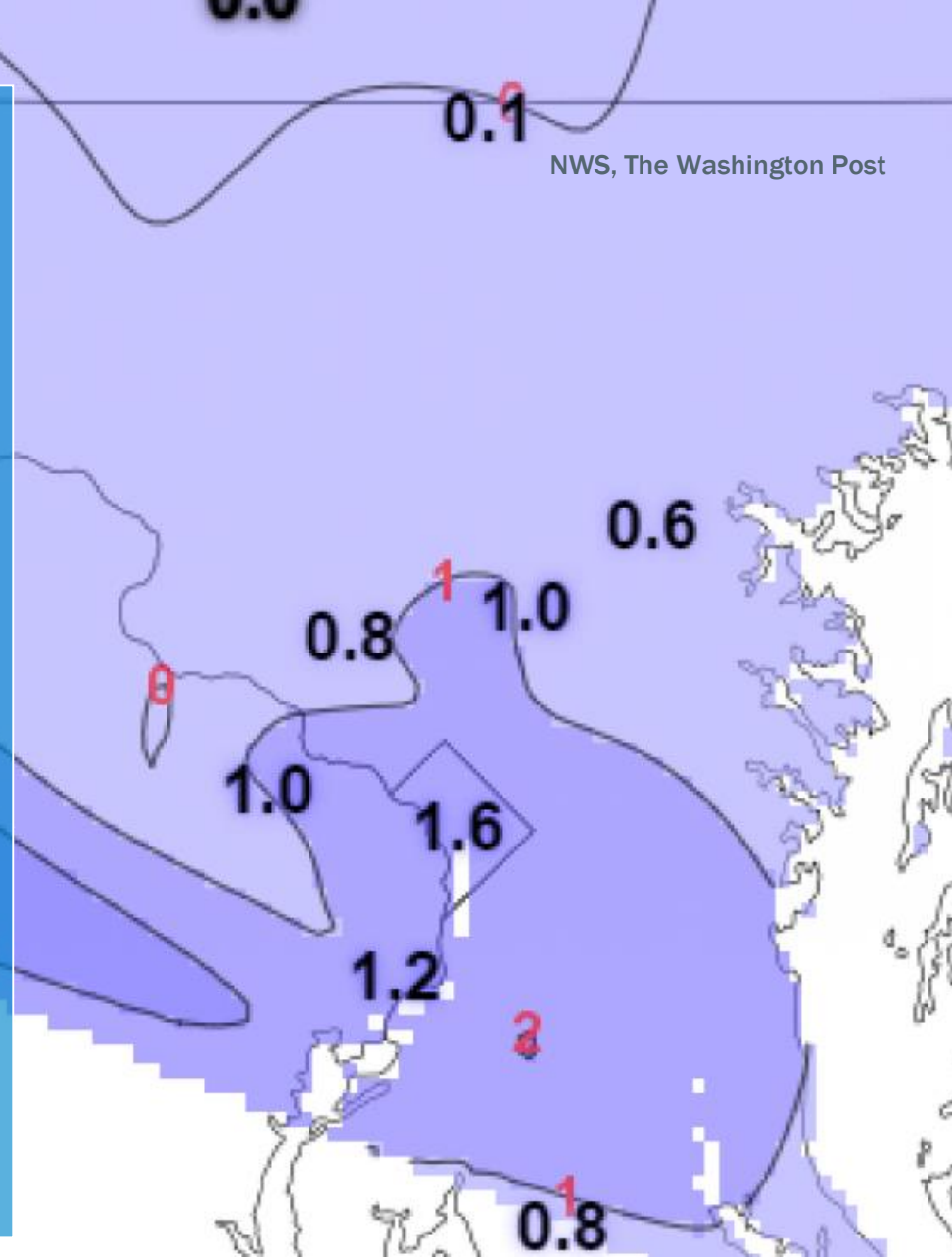
Forecasts

- As part of its EPC presentation, the National Weather Service reviewed its forecasts related to the January 20th storm. For example,
 - (January 19) NWS called for a 20 percent chance of snow showers on the evening of January 20.
 - (January 20 - 9:30 A.M.) NWS called for a 60 percent chance of snow showers in the evening with little to no accumulation.
 - (January 20 - 11:14 A.M.) NWS issued a Winter Weather Advisory for coating to 1 inch of snow between 6 and 10 P.M.
- Additional factor: Long-range forecast was for major blizzard starting on January 22nd.

January 20, 2016 – Evening Rush Hour

- Snow began at evening rush hour and froze upon making contact with the street. Temperatures were below freezing for days prior to storm, so roadways were not pre-treated.
- Conditions brought traffic to a standstill, and the heavy traffic limited snow crew effectiveness.
- Snowfall varied throughout the region, totaling between a dusting and two inches.

NWS, The Washington Post



Applicability of 2011 Recommendations

- Several recommendations from 2011 were not applied on January 20, 2016 since the forecasts did not meet the criteria for officials to fully mobilize regional coordination *prior to the event*, such as:
 - COG regional snow call.
 - Metropolitan Area Transportation Operations Coordination (MATOC) Program severe weather coordination.
 - Public information officer coordination and regional messaging.
 - Regional information sharing through the Information Collection and Coordination Center (IC3) at DC HSEMA.

2011 Recommendations Applied in Other Events

- COG has been proactive in convening regional snow calls. Recent survey data shows vast majority of users find information helpful.
- MATOC has improved interagency information sharing, convened severe weather calls, and transitioned to 24/7 operations as needed.
- The Office of Personnel Management's telework, dismissal, and closure options have been implemented on numerous occasions.
- PIOs coordinate regularly, send messages via local channels.
- IC3 is tasked with maintaining a regional picture and initiating conference calls as needed to keep officials informed. Additional staff to be hired with FY 16 UASI funds to provide 24/7 operations.

EPC Takeaways

- January 20, 2016 storm was a particularly challenging event with a risk tradeoff. Officials should weigh the benefits and costs of mobilizing for smaller storms with low probability forecasts but high potential for disruptions.
- Forecasters should examine ways to better convey risks related to low probability storms. (i.e. when conditions such as below freezing temperatures increase likelihood of serious icing) so that employers and public can consider preventative measures (telework, early dismissal).
- Officials should focus on coordinating messages (such as ‘stay put’) to the public during short-notice and no-notice events or when situations deteriorate. Communication with commuters is challenging because many do not listen to radio news, so the jurisdictions’ text alert systems and social media are valuable tools.

Next Steps

- Lessons learned from January 20th incorporated into preparations for winter 2016-2017.
 - Incorporate additional criteria for regional snow calls (e.g., cold road surfaces, timing of storm during rush hours) to better inform organizational and individual decisions with greater advance notice to implement preventative measures.
 - Implement additional communication methods for reaching public and employers especially during unexpected events with specific information on conditions and advice on actions that can be taken to avoid adding to gridlocked conditions.

Stuart Freudberg

COG Deputy Executive Director
(202) 962-3340
sfreudberg@mwcog.org

mwcog.org

777 North Capitol Street NE, Suite 300
Washington, DC 20002



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