

Washington's First-of-its-Kind App Warns Emergency Responders

Description of Initiative:

In June 2015, fierce winds swept embers from a raging wildfire outside of Wenatchee, Washington, into a commercial area, igniting material first at a recycling center, then at a nearby fruit packing plant. The blaze soon threatened tanks holding thousands of pounds of ammonia and other toxic chemicals. When staff of the Washington Department of Ecology (Ecology) spill response unit were called in, they brought a new tool to the scene: their cell phones.

Just before the Wenatchee wildfire broke out, Ecology's Hazardous Waste and Toxics Reduction program began piloting a new smartphone app that allows emergency responders to access data on what chemicals are stored at a facility and in what quantity. Knowing what chemicals are onsite allows first responders – both Ecology's own spill teams and local police and firefighters – to choose the right safety gear and take steps to protect themselves and nearby residents. Ecology already collects this information under the federal Emergency Planning and Community Right to Know Act, or EPCRA, on behalf of the State Emergency Response Commission. The commission requested Ecology's help in making the information available on cell phones. Until now, the information was kept in paper records or on computer spreadsheets, and responders needed to request the latest data from Ecology to get updates.

The "Washington State EPCRA" app is the first mobile app Ecology has produced – and the first EPCRA mobile app available in the entire country. Along with information on the chemicals themselves, the app provides directions, gives responders access to facility contacts, and provides other information.

Ecology makes the app available for Android and Apple phones. Although the app itself is free and available in the official app stores, downloading the emergency data requires an access key from Ecology to ensure the tool is used by authorized emergency responders.

Results to Date:

- App downloaded 430 times by Washington responders to date;
- Reports from responders involved in the Wenatchee wildfire that this data was vital in responding to the event; and
- Several inquiries from other states interested in developing their own EPCRA apps.

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