



May 18, 2011

## **Analysis of the chemical release at Precision Castparts and Portland's use of the community notification system**

### **INTRO**

At 5:37 pm on Wednesday, May 11th, Clackamas Fire District responded to a hazardous materials release at the Precision Castparts Corporation, located at 5001 SE Johnson Creek Boulevard on the line between Clackamas County and Multnomah County. Units from Portland Fire & Rescue and Gresham Fire Department were dispatched to provide mutual aid.

The emergency response agencies involved worked quickly to reduce the danger to residents. Early in the event, incident command notified the public through the media to shelter in place. Throughout the event, no 911-related medical calls were received from the surrounding neighborhoods. Two Clackamas Fire firefighters and two employees of Precision Castparts were treated for respiratory irritation, but released from the hospital later in the evening.

As the incident progressed, local television and radio actively covered the event. Information released from the public information officers on scene was extensive with no single communications tool relied upon to communicate with the public. Direct contact with television and radio stations and the use of social media were all employed.

However, Portland's "reverse-911" system was not activated at any point during the incident. An internal review of the factors contributing to this lapse follows, along with a timeline of events on May 11, and outcomes as a result of this analysis. This analysis was conducted by POEM, BOEC, the Mayor's Office, and Commissioner Amanda Fritz' office, with additional information from Clackamas County.

### **CONTRIBUTING FACTORS**

As Clackamas Fire has noted, this incident was complicated by its location on the border between two counties. As a result, multiple emergency communications and management agencies were involved, including Clackamas County Communications (C-COM), the Portland Bureau of Emergency Communications (BOEC), and the Portland Office of Emergency Management (POEM).

During the incident, there was a lack of adequate and clear communication between the multiple agencies as it related to the community notification system.

Additionally, POEM and BOEC lacked clear written protocols for activating Portland's FirstCall system, which has been in place since late 2010.

## **BACKGROUND ON FIRSTCALL SYSTEM**

Portland's new FirstCall system is a joint effort with Multnomah County managed by the Portland Office of Emergency Management (POEM) and Portland Water Bureau that has been in place since late 2010. The system is capable of notifying residents in a geographic area through published landline phone numbers, in addition to unpublished landline numbers, cell phone numbers, and email addresses that residents opt-in to the system.

This spring, POEM developed an Alert and Warning Annex that establishes a consistent framework for how the City uses technology to communicate emergency information to the public. This Annex includes the use of the FirstCall system, stating: "The use of this notification service requires prior authorization by the Incident Commander of the lead response bureau, POEM Director or elected official. Upon authorization by the Incident Commander, POEM Director or elected official, activation may be initiated by BOEC supervisor, POEM Duty Officer, other FirstCall system administrator (Water Bureau, Multnomah County Emergency Management Director and Portland Police Bureau) or directly via FirstCall."

The Annex was presented to the Portland Disaster Policy Council—which includes the Mayor, Directors of POEM and BOEC, and the Chiefs of Police and Fire, among others—on April 19. POEM requested comments from Disaster Policy Council members by April 27. POEM also conducted a test of the FirstCall system on April 27, in the Johnson Creek area of Southeast Portland. The final approved draft of the Annex is expected to be formally adopted by City Council by the end of June.

In Portland and Multnomah County, residents can sign up for the FirstCall system to be notified during a future emergency event by visiting the website [www.publicalerts.org](http://www.publicalerts.org) and providing contact information. Notices can be received by landline phone, cell phone and email.

## **TIMELINE OF MAY 11 INCIDENT**

On May 11, the first Clackamas Fire crews on scene noticed an orange cloud emerging from the building and traveling directly north of the plant into Portland. Public information officers from Clackamas Fire and Portland Fire soon began communicating with the media about the need for residents within a half-mile of the plant to remain in their homes. At 6:04 pm, Clackamas Fire asked Clackamas County Communications (C-COM) to contact the Portland Bureau of Emergency Communications (BOEC) to activate Portland's community notification system to notify residents in the affected area as an additional means of informing the public.

The BOEC supervisor on duty immediately contacted the Portland Police Bureau to activate the Portland Emergency Notification System (PENS) – a system once operated out of the Police Bureau's

North Precinct, but defunct since July 2009. The BOEC supervisor on duty was not aware of Portland's new FirstCall system, which was activated in December 2010.

After receiving notification of the Precision Castparts event from Multnomah County's Emergency Manager, David Houghton, Portland Office of Emergency Management (POEM) bureau director Carmen Merlo called the BOEC supervisor around 6:40 pm to learn more about the situation. Merlo learned that BOEC tried to activate the PENS system. During the course of the conversation, the BOEC supervisor on duty was informed of the FirstCall system taking the place of PENS. The BOEC supervisor asked Merlo how the FirstCall system could be activated, and whether Merlo was the contact "or would someone else be the contact in the future if we need to have that [activated]." Merlo confirmed that she is the contact. During the conversation, the BOEC supervisor did not ask Merlo to activate the FirstCall system, nor did Merlo ask the BOEC supervisor whether the FirstCall system needed to be activated.

Soon after the story broke, local media was reporting that a "reverse-911" call had gone out to Portland residents near the Precision Castparts plant.

At 9:53 pm, Clackamas Fire asked for a second activation of Portland's community notification system. At 9:59 pm, BOEC communicated to C-COM that the community notification requested at 6:04 pm had not occurred, but that POEM could respond to the new request using the FirstCall system. C-COM contacted the POEM duty officer at 10:25 pm about using FirstCall.

At 10:27 pm, Merlo received a call from William Warren, POEM's duty officer that evening, to indicate Clackamas County requested the use of the FirstCall system.

At 10:29 pm, Merlo contacted C-COM to get text of message for community notification and confirm authorization by Clackamas Fire incident command. C-COM provided the number of the incident commander to contact directly.

At 10:37 pm, Merlo left a voice message with the Clackamas Fire incident commander to confirm the message and authorization.

At 10:42 pm, Merlo received a call from the Clackamas Fire incident commander. Discussion ensued whether to issue alert this late in the evening, given no new information or change in perimeter. The incident commander indicated he would call back after further discussion.

At 11:06 pm, Merlo contacted the incident commander to find out whether to launch or hold off.

At 11:10 pm, Merlo received call back from incident commander indicating they will hold off on using the FirstCall system that evening, but may ask for notification to be done in the morning. The incident commander did not request a notification the next day.

## **OUTCOMES OF THIS ANALYSIS**

While an Alert and Warning Annex had been developed, additional training on steps to activate the system are needed. Training on the use of the system will be conducted for BOEC and City public safety and emergency response bureaus.

The Alert and Warning Annex has been updated to clarify the current procedure for activating the FirstCall system. The Annex now clearly states: "Requests for activation of the FirstCall community notification system must be coordinated through POEM via the Duty Officer or POEM Director. If another bureau or agency has requested the activation of the community notification system, the Duty Officer will immediately notify the POEM Director."

Clear protocols are now in place at BOEC for dispatch supervisors to page the POEM duty officer for requests to activate the FirstCall system.

BOEC will also develop internal protocols for the direct use and activation of the FirstCall system.

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