

## Around the County Severe Weather

(Music playing)

Hi, this is Kelly Parks from the Sedgwick County Commission. In this edition of Around the County we will be talking with Randy Duncan, Director of Emergency Preparedness, and he's going to talk to us a little bit about watches and warnings and other events that happen with the warning system. The season is upon us and Randy, I'd welcome you today to Around the County.

(Randy Duncan)

Thank you very much, Chairman Parks, I appreciate that. You're right. We are headed into the season when severe weather happens. In particular, April, May and June are the big months in Kansas when we get lots and lots of tornadoes; although really, there's not any month that we have never had zero tornadoes, at least since 1950. Even in January, we've recorded the occurrence of three tornadoes during that time period. And last year's season was particularly active. We had 187 tornadoes in the season, in Kansas in 2008 and that set a new record for the number of tornadoes. In fact, the record that it broke was set in 2007. So, three out of our last four years have had record numbers of tornadoes. I don't know what that indicates for this season, but we'll certainly be keeping a very, very, watchful eye. Our average here in Kansas is only 59 tornadoes but as you can see, in recent years we've really, really been exceeding that.

(Chairman Parks) Maybe there's some kind of a cycle there.

(Randy Duncan) Well, it's entirely possible. You know, the records are based on a 50 year rolling average in the time period between 1958 and 2008 and it seems like the average number of tornadoes has been increasing in recent years. Now, there's a lot of speculation as to whether that increase is an actual increase in the number of tornadoes or because there's more of us living in a larger area where we are actually just seeing the tornadoes that occurred all the time that we didn't know about before. But, regardless, our numbers have been up. Fortunately, the number of fatalities and the number of people injured as a result of tornadoes has come down over that time period, drastically.

(Chairman Parks) That must be due to warning devices and things and can you tell us a little bit about the warning system and what Sedgwick County uses for a warning system?

(Randy Duncan) Absolutely, that's a great question and I know everybody's very interested in finding out about that. In Sedgwick County we have a multiple layered system of warning. One of those layers is the outdoor warning devices or tornado sirens, as some people refer to them. Another layer of the system is our partnership with the electronic media; radio and television. A third layer of our warning system is the NOAA weather radio and the emergency alert system in those areas that are served by Cox Cablevision. But really the final and most important layer of our warning system is you. If you know what to do when you get warning information about a severe weather

occurrence or a tornado and you take action to protect yourselves and your loved ones that's a successful response to a storm, as far as we're concerned.

(Chairman Parks) You have some props here with you today and some things that we might want to take a look at. From the electronic side; kind of tell us about some of the things that you have here.

(Randy Duncan) Sure, let me start about first talking about the NOAA weather radio, we talked a little bit about it just a moment ago. This is a typical NOAA weather radio device here, which you can buy at almost any electronic retailer. Typically, these sell anywhere from 30 to \$50 per unit. I think the most important thing to look out for; when you're looking at the NOAA weather radio be sure that it says it has specific area message encoding or SAME technology. Now what that allows you to do is program this radio so that it will only go off for alerts, watches, warnings that relate to Sedgwick County. In the past, I know many people have not been very happy with the NOAA weather radio system because there would be a problem in a far-away county and their device would go off. Well, this new technology eliminates that problem and that's really a major, major plus. You also talked about some of our other stuff that we brought today. This kind of represents, if you will, a typical disaster supplies kit that we'd like for people to put together. You know, there are three major steps to being prepared. The first is to make a plan, get a kit, and just in general be aware of what's going on. So, as a part of getting a kit we want to show you what we think ought to be in a typical kit. One of the most important things is represented by this empty 2-liter soda bottle here, which is essentially water. You've got to have water for each and every person that's going to be supplied out of the kit and that's very important. That's what this represents. Another very important thing to have with us, in our disaster supplies kit these days is a portable radio. Especially with the recent change to digital broadcast television, the old analog system and signal are not out there anymore so if you previously relied on a portable television you may want to rely on a portable radio until you buy a new portable television that has a digital tuner or something else of that nature. Frequently, when there is a storm there are also outages in the power and so another very important piece that needs to be in the disaster supplies kit is a flashlight or some other way to be able to see in case there's a power outage and it's at night.

(Chairman Parks) With new and fresh batteries.

(Randy Duncan) With new and fresh batteries, you bet. And if you are a family, one of the important things is to make sure that the kids have something to keep them occupied while you are figuring out what's going on, how long you may have to stay in shelter so we put this little 6 in 1 magnetic game kit in there to represent stuff for the kids. Also, when there's a tornado it's always associated with a thunderstorm and so we suggest you probably ought to have a rain poncho to go in there. Another thing that's very important is to have in your disaster supplies kit personal hygiene items; for example this package of portable shavers and food that doesn't require heating to eat so here's an example of a granola bar and some other types of things. If you're like me and have to wear glasses, you probably want to make sure you've got a spare pair of glasses in case something

happens and you don't, and you're not able to reach them. And in addition, you probably want to bring along any prescription medications that you take on a regular basis. You were right on when you talked about the issue of fresh batteries; here's our supply of fresh batteries to go in our electronic devices and one thing I'd really like to suggest that people include in their disaster supplies kit is a whistle. Now, you might ask why is a whistle a good thing to include in there.

(Chairman Parks) I know why you'd want a whistle, but why don't you tell us Randy?

(Randy Duncan) You bet. Well, one thing is: it's entirely possible if you've gone to your basement or other area to take shelter that the building may collapse and so this whistle enables you to make a noise so that rescuers, potentially, can find you a lot more easily, with a lot less difficulty, so that's a very, very important thing. And yes, I know, you're familiar with your background, the importance of whistles and their ability to make noise. Another very important thing to have in our disaster supplies kit is a disaster first aid kit. And just the basics, you know, cotton balls, band-aids, wet wipes, those sorts of things. This is one that was put together by a, I think it was a local Scout troop, sold as a fund-raising project so, that's where we got this particular one. And, of course, as we talked about earlier, if you're a family and you have little ones, don't forget all the appropriate supplies for the little ones because that could be very important in a shelter situation. So, the basic thing is have it all together, have it in one place, have it in a bag or other carrying device that's real easy to grab as you're on your way out. Either evacuating or going to shelter as this can be an all purpose disaster supplies kit.

(Chairman Parks) This is while we're at home; now when we're out on the road or out in a gaming situation, say the kids are out at a baseball game and you come up on a sudden storm and a tornado, kind of talk to us a little bit about outdoor warning devices.

(Randy Duncan) Yes, as a matter of fact, we talked earlier about the different layers and we talked about the outdoor warning devices as being one of them. Here in Sedgwick County we have about 160 overall in our system. Now many of those, matter of fact, all but 101 are owned and operated by the small communities within Sedgwick County. But 101 of them are owned and operated by Sedgwick County and activated by Sedgwick County. Now, we test this system every Monday when the weather is clear. There's no time of year that we don't test it unless the sky is overcast, or there's the remote possibility that someone could misinterpret the test as an actual warning. The reason we do that is we need to make sure our system is functional all year long and if you'll remember back I told you we've recorded tornadoes in every month of the year, even January and that's why we keep our system tested and up to date all the time. Now, there are several things to bear in mind about the outdoor warning devices. First of all, they are not designed to be heard inside your home. Modern homes are built for energy efficiency, there's very few air exchanges per hour and as a result our utility bills are considerably less than what they used to be, and the ability of sound to get into our homes isn't as easy as it once was. Also, you've got to remember that the outdoor warning devices are operated off of commercial electricity. So, when there's a power outage those devices will not function. So, it's important to remember that while they are an

important layer of the warning system, they are only one layer and perhaps not even the primary one. So, we really, strongly urge people who are concerned about getting information related to weather warnings; particularly overnight when we're at home, asleep that the NOAA weather radio is really the best way to go. You can plug it in, you can put it in your bedroom. Most of these devices, this one included, have a place where you can put a battery in so that they will operate in case the power goes out. These devices are designed so that the alert tone can wake even the most sound of sleepers, and I'm a very sound sleeper and when mine goes off it brings me right up and awake so that I know what's going on.

(Chairman Parks) Touch a little bit on cell phones and their use. If you're in a bartlett room or an area in a basement or something that you might not get real good reception there. Would you recommend a hard line in that area; a hard line phone?

(Randy Duncan) You know, that's an excellent suggestion. If you have an area designated underground that you seek shelter; either a safe room or otherwise; it's probably not a bad idea to have a traditional land line telephone available. And, there are a number of reasons for that, which you alluded to. First of all is the fact that the wireless system, particularly in an emergency, can easily and quickly become overwhelmed and you may have not access to the telephone system. Plus, if you're underground or in an area where the coverage might not be the best your land line type telephone is definitely going to be more reliable for an emergency situation. So I think that's a good thing to keep in mind.

(Chairman Parks) Also, say Mom's at the grocery store and the kids are at the ball field and Dad's at home and a tornado comes through. Talk about a safe meeting place, or a meeting place afterwards, or some plans or arrangements that you have so you'll know where people are at.

(Randy Duncan) Exactly; you know, earlier we talked about the three steps of getting prepared. The first one of course is: make a plan, get a kit, be aware of what's going on. As a part of making a plan one of the best activities that we really, highly recommend is to get together with your family and set a meeting place. Don't just set one; set one that's close to your house, in case the emergency is very narrow in scope and involves only the house, for example, maybe it's a fire situation so the agreement is you are going to meet by the river birch out in the back yard. You might also want to set one in the area and then as a third alternative you might want to all agree upon an out of town relative so that you can call in and touch base with that person if there's a larger scale disaster. Maybe you want to make sure that everybody has Aunt Sally in Seattle's telephone number because frequently in an emergency situation, it's very odd, but sometimes it's easier to get through on long distance lines than it is on the local telephone exchange.

(Chairman Parks) Briefly, if we could talk about a car, when you're in a car out in the country or you see a tornado. Talk to us a little bit about right angles and where you should and shouldn't go.

(Randy Duncan) Exactly, and you've nailed it right on the head, Chairman Parks. The issue is when you're out in your vehicle, particularly in the country if you have four clear directions that you can drive and you can drive away from the tornado at a right angle you might wish to try that first. However, if you can't drive away from the tornado at a right angle, never try to outrun a tornado. Tornadoes are tremendously variable in how fast they travel and the direction and some of these tornadoes can travel anywhere from 50 to 100 miles an hour so never try to outrun them in a car. If you're in a car when a tornado happens, and you can't get away at right angles, your best place to take shelter is by lying flat in a ditch, ravine, depression or other interruption to the general lay of the land. The reason why that's a good place to take shelter is, people get hurt mainly by windborne debris in a tornado so if you can get under the path of that debris by being in a ditch, ravine, culvert, or other low lying area that's what provides you safety. But having said that, don't forget that tornadoes are always connected to thunderstorms and with thunderstorms there's always rain. So, one last word of advice, don't survive the tornado to drown in the rain storm.

(Chairman Parks) Well, I'd certainly like to thank you, Director Duncan, for giving us those tips. It is springtime and we are trying to get all of the information that we can out to the people. We can go back and you can review this on the website. If you have other questions or want other family members to view this tape. It's very important for public safety to heed to some of these things that we've talked about today. I'd like to thank you on behalf of the County Commission. Have a safe and wonderful Spring season.