

New Social Media Tools Will Improve Disaster Resilience

Washington State's economy is extremely dependent on maritime trade. The ports in the Puget Sound region are vital for the import and export of goods, as well as for the cruise industry and commercial fishing. Technology is needed that will allow Puget Sound ports and their partner agencies to better communicate with the public in case of a terrorist threat or natural disaster. Thanks to a Federal Port Security grant, the United States Coast Guard, Puget Sound ports, and emergency management agencies will leverage the latest social media technology to improve security and disaster resilience.

The **FirstToSee System** will give port workers and the general public new tools for reporting suspicious activity, or for providing real-time information during a disaster. The project will also help the Coast Guard, ports and emergency agencies fulfill their mission of ensuring the safety and security of Washington's waterways. Smartphone apps and social media will allow small boat operators, passengers, or longshoremen to upload photos, videos and GPS locations when making a report. These reports can then be sent to emergency agencies to provide information on real-time events.

In the last five years, social media have played an increasing role in emergencies and disasters. (Social media is defined as technology that enables people to widely share information almost instantly). Popular social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are important sources for getting emergency information. The public uses social media to warn others of unsafe situations, stay in touch with friends and family, and raise funds for disaster relief. First responders use social media to quickly broadcast information and receive citizen feedback. The FirstToSee system will fill an important communications gap between citizens and emergency responders by providing means for reporting incidents both on water and land.

Currently, the public's main method for alerting authorities during an emergency is the 911 system. The project will give citizens a new way to directly communicate with public safety agencies and provide information beyond the traditional phone call. The social media system will keep situational awareness high, as well as assist the Coast Guard, port authorities, and local governments in creating a shared common operating picture. This may help in preventing an incident before it occurs, based on reports from citizens documenting events as they occur.

The project development team has been comprised of agencies dedicated to public awareness and experienced with state-of-the-art technologies. Project partners include the Pacific Northwest Economic Region, Pierce County, US Coast Guard, Port of Everett, Everett Emergency Management, the WA Fusion Center, Port of Bellingham, the WA Ports Association, JHOC, and WSDOT Ferries. Response agencies are also being invited to assist in the Phase II planning, design and deployment of this new technology.

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