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“Norfolk Hazardous Waste Team in Wayne After Tornado”

The tornado in Wayne, Nebraska Friday destroyed homes and businesses and left the community vulnerable to another danger- an exposure to hazardous materials.

When City of Norfolk emergency dispatchers received a call for help from Wayne authorities about a possible hazardous materials emergency, a team of trained professionals were ready to go.

“A group of Norfolk firefighters left immediately taking along the hazardous materials trailer full of specialized



equipment including monitors, fully encapsulated suits, patching and plugging material and other containment supplies, and much more,” said Scott Cordes, Chief of the Norfolk Fire Division.

Twenty-eight Norfolk firefighters are currently trained as Hazardous Materials Technicians. Twenty-six fire and rescue personnel, which included some reserve firefighters, headed to Wayne to not only identify and control the hazardous material situation but to also help if needed in any search and rescue operation.

They took the Hazardous Materials Unit Trailer which is often used as the command center in a hazardous materials emergency. It’s equipped with WiFi, communication radios, a laptop, cooling vests, air masks and containment systems that would help stop the spread of any hazardous material.

The concern of Wayne officials that precipitated the call to Norfolk was the condition of the Van Diest Supply Company, a farm chemical supply company located in eastern Wayne, that lay right in the path of Friday’s tornado. The building had been damaged and a cloud of vapor was coming from inside causing officials to think there may have been dangerous chemicals escaping into the air.

“Members of the Van Diest staff, who know their chemicals very well, knew if the pesticides and insecticides were mixed with water there could have been an inhalation problem for people in the area,” Cordes said. At that time the area had already been evacuated for possible chemical hazards. The Norfolk technicians were able to research the chemicals stored in the building so they knew what they’d be dealing with when they arrived on the site.

"We need to know the material's physical properties, its toxicity, flammability and how it reacts to water before we begin to contain it," said Bob Nelson, Norfolk Fire Division Lieutenant.

Upon arrival, four members of the Norfolk Hazardous Materials team put on protective gear and self-contained breathing apparatus that would prevent any exposure to dangerous chemicals or poisonous gas in the building. They entered the damaged building carrying a specialized hazardous material video camera that streams video of what is going on inside to a computer in the trailer outside. Officials of Van Diest were in the trailer watching the video to see if the products and materials were in the correct location, if they were intact and if all the products were accounted for.

The video showed that all of the chemical containers were intact and undamaged. Members of the Hazardous Materials team found that the vapor cloud coming out of the building was not from any chemical but was the result of a ruptured water line from the fire sprinkler system. The site was considered safe from chemical contamination.

The Norfolk Fire Division Hazardous Materials Team is the only State sanctioned and supported hazardous materials team in Northeast Nebraska. It is one of ten in the state of Nebraska set up by the Nebraska Emergency Management Agency and in cooperation with the Nebraska Department of Environmental Quality, the Nebraska State Patrol and the Nebraska State Fire Marshal.

Norfolk firefighters have undergone intensive training and continue to train at least once a week on hazardous material issues that include learning and reviewing the use of the hazardous material equipment.

"The potential is real when the Haz-Mat team is called out. They don't know what they are going to encounter when they arrive at a site. In this case, there was a fear that some of the chemical containers had ruptured and poisons were being released into the air. Fortunately they were able to identify the source of the vapor and the containers were intact which allowed employees to safely re-enter the building," Cordes said.