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Flood Interview – Mark Hunt

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Notes:

Mark Hunt is the head of the Municipal Utilities in Fairbanks, Alaska. Hunt says Municipal Utilities operates four basic utility services. They furnish water to the city of Fairbanks, they have a small steam heat system in the center of Fairbanks, they furnish telephones to Fairbanks and the Fairbanks area, and they furnish electrical services to the Fairbanks area. He is the general manager in charge of all of these utilities. Hunt says that he was aware that there was a crest on the way and that the river would be high. They tried to make preparations around 5 o'clock. He told the journeymen type people to go get something to eat and come back so they would be available. At 4:30-5 o'clock they became aware there would be a flood. The first utilities to really be affected by the flood was the river crossing, both power and telephone wires going over the Island Homes. They tried getting a truck in there to use as a dam and an anchor. They failed and the truck drowned on the way. That was the first real trouble. From then on it was water getting into the telephone cable and the cable shorted. They had people in the switchboard room and as the cable went bad they put paper between the relay contacts to isolate that cable and this way they managed to keep the phones in town that were able to work, working. This happened between midnight and 1 o'clock he guesses, after the crest was in Fairbanks. The electrical system was basically unaffected by the whole flood. They lost bits and pieces where people had transformers and vaults in their basement. Anyone who had access to electricity could have used it. The water usage went up from a million gallon usage a day to 4.5 million gallon usage a day. This was all attributed to leaks that were in the system as a result of things like people running over fire hydrants with trucks and boats. Power was maintained and treated water was maintained. Hunt says they did not have the manpower to soften water at 4 million gallons a day. They have the facility to soften the water if they are prepared for it. They upped the chlorine in the water so the water would be safe and so people would believe it was safe. The steam system was shut down deliberately because the river cut through First Avenue and there is a high pressure steam line there so they shut the steam line down about two hours before the water got to it. This happened at 10 pm. They serve building like the Northward, Polaris, JC Penny, most of the business on Second Avenue, as far up Cushman St. as Main Junior High. There are only about 175 customers total on the steam system. Fairbanks water supply comes from three deep wells plus there are also three deep wells for fire protection that kick extra water into the system. The actual supply the wells are used for cooling water in the condensers of the power plant and from the condensers they come to the treatment plant. Part of the water is treated and the rest is dumped into the Chena River. The main problem with the electricity was a few poles got lost. The major problems were with underground cable and transformers. Most of the time the electrical crews were trying to save transformers that were in danger of blowing up. They also tried to

get in and save the river crossing. Hunt says employees used their own boats. A little later in the flood they got from the Corps of Engineers two track vehicles and one was used for the electrical department and the other for the telephone department. At the start of the flood guys got to work on boats and inner-tubes. There was no shortage of people. They slept in the power plant and treatment plant. There was a chow line set up. They kept in contact with Civil Defense up until they lost the basement. They got their sand bags through Civil Defense. The main switchboard was in the basement so as the water started coming up in the street they started sandbagging to save the equipment. They sandbagged and kept the water out until a wall in the basement broke and everything was lost. The Greenwood Exchange never went out. When the switchboard was lost, Greenwood lost the ability to dial anywhere but Greenwood. The heaviest utility damage was downtown. The cost was \$250,000 worth of equipment in the basement plus that much cable. All the private branch exchanges were lost. Each one was worth \$6,000-\$30,000 dollars. The heaviest damage was probably the telephone because downtown is underground.

At 17:20 of the recording, Hunt begins discussing the changes to the utility company as a result of the flood. He says that the power supply is no longer in the basement. The private switchboards are going into second floors. The cables are pressurized now. Most of the steam system is direct burial type and the pipe in the ground seemed to absorb the shock because of the ground. He says the utility company tried to sandbag around manholes so it couldn't take water. 90% of the telephone service is back. The big things out right now are the switchboards. There are over half of the 20 switchboards in town ready to be installed. Everything should be back in service by the first of the year. There were 14 people from Anchorage working in the telephone department. The telephone department was the only place that was called for help. A big part of the telephone repair work is being done under contract by the Corps of Engineers. The steam system was repaired in the same way as the water systems. The Polaris building fire alarm trip during the flood and there was a gusher that required divers. All of the pumping stations and fire wells were submerged. There was no particular trouble at the water plant. A plane flies by at 25:12 as Hunt is talking about damage to the power plant, which included coal brushing plant being underwater. There is a conveyer belt that crosses the [Chena] River to the power plant from a crusher. Hunt discusses the process to save the coal loader and conveyer. There was around 4,000 tons of coal but a big share of that was lost when the river came up. Coal from Fort Wainwright's stockpile was then used. The electrical system can be tied to Fort Wainwright, Golden Valley, Eielson, and the UAF. He says the utilities did supply power to the grid during the flood but now operates isolated again. Hunt says they supplied all the power that was supplied at Fort Wainwright at one point. He says the utilities kept Bassett Hospital alive and he thinks that was all the power Wainwright was using. He says Wainwright was completely dead and picked up the feeder to the hospital. He says that many residential houses electricity was still going even though the basement and first floor was flooded. He says he's not going to pretend that by the first of the year Fairbanks will be how it was before the flood and that it is going to take at least until next summer for things to be running the same again.

At 31:10 of the recording, Hunt says during the flood the Corps of Engineers set up a flood center. Colonel Harden was in town with several of his people and they set up to coordinate between utilities and what services the military could provide. They coordinate helicopters, 6 x 6's, floating tanks etc.

The Corps of Engineers has been the agency that has administered the contracts to fix any problems from the flood. The municipal utility system is owned by the city. The other departments of the city are responsible to the city manager who was hired and responsible to the city council. In Hunt's case he was hired by and responsible to an elected public utility board who in turn are responsible to the city council. He says the relations with the city are good. They had help from the public works department. The front end loader was used to get coals. The steam system is fully operative. Barring unforeseen troubles Hunt says they are completely back to normal. The evidence he sees he thinks the groundwater is down good. The utility bridge between Fairbanks and Hamilton Acres has been reestablished. There is one river crossing into Island Homes that carries the telephone cable and one electric service to a sewer treatment plant. That one was lost and it hasn't been reestablished. It's under contract and they are working on it. A lot of people are shuffling around according to Hunt; there are empty homes and more apartments being rented. There hasn't been much significant turnover at the utilities system because of the flood.

Hunt says they had the people in Anchorage working beside Fairbanks people. Early in the flood some people worked 24 hours a day. They got to the point where a man would work 12 hours a day and go home and work 8 hours. Hunt says most of the workers were six 12 hour days. The Fairbanks people didn't like the fact that Anchorage people were getting more hours. The basic reason was that they were getting less work out of a 12 hour day than they were in an eight hour day. To solve the whole problem the Anchorage people went home and the work they were doing is going to contractors. The contractors are working 6-7 long days a week and the Fairbanks employees are working regular hours.