



# Safety After The Storm

## Restoring Your Flood-Damaged Commercial Property

*The magnitude of damage inflicted by floods caused by hurricanes and other dangerous storms can be devastating to many building owners. As building owners begin the arduous restoration process, here are a few tips for re-entering and restoring your facility.*

### Safety First

Following a natural disaster, the first priority without question is to ensure the safety of those on-site. Facility managers should communicate and follow some basic guidelines to help ensure the safety of staff, contractors and tenants on-site.

- **Check for structural damage.** Do not go in if there is any chance of the building collapsing. It is recommended that a fully qualified professional engineer visit the site to assess structural damage and identify potentially dangerous areas so that people are kept away until the damage is repaired or temporary safety measures are put in place.
- **Contact utility companies.** Upon entering the building, make sure that all electrical and gas systems are shut off. Plan to leave these systems off until a representative from the utility company has been able to inspect the site and ensure that it is safe to start using power and gas again.
- **Use common sense.** Upon entering the building, do not use matches, cigarette lighters or any other open flames, since natural gas and other combustible fumes may be trapped inside. Be careful walking around, as floors and stairs can be slippery with mud and debris.
- **Don't drink the water.** Until local authorities proclaim the water supply to be safe, bring bottled water for those working on-site.

### Assemble a Team

Immediately following the disaster, one of the first tasks at hand is to assemble a team that can effectively work to return the property to its normal operational state as quickly as possible. The cleanup process in large, commercial properties is extremely complex and involves many players. In addition, the mere size of the building dictates that help be brought in to manage the problem. The best thing to do is carefully assemble a strong, well-balanced team that can help through all parts of the process.

- **Assign a point person.** Assign a project lead who can manage the project from a high level. This person's role is to coordinate all parties, select vendors, understand the legal and PR implications of the process, and communicate well with others. Centralized decision making in a time of crisis is helpful for



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moving the project forward in time to salvage as much property as possible and for minimizing restoration time.

- **Select a drying firm.** There is actually a science surrounding the drying process that includes mapping the water damage, measuring and monitoring the drying rate, and confirming the final moisture levels of the dry material. This indicates that there is more to drying out a building than meets the eye. Inexperienced drying firms may bring in heaters and fans, believing that the quicker the drying, the better. However, improper drying techniques (too fast or too slow) can ruin materials inside the building and damage the integrity of the structure. It is critical to select an experienced drying firm. It is also helpful to select a firm that is familiar with the documentation process necessary to support insurance claims.
- **Identify an expert firm to oversee the process.** There are firms with extensive experience in managing remediation processes following a natural or man-made disaster. These firms can direct you through the process, assist with vendor selection, and lend expertise and comprehensive oversight services to ensure that every decision is made in the best interest of the property owner and is being done with the long-term health of occupants and the safety of the building structure in mind.

### Set Up a Triage System

Upon the return to a water-damaged building, the primary objective is to work to keep a bad situation from getting worse. The idea is to salvage property that can be saved. A key responsibility of the insured is to limit further damage. Preventing water damage from fostering mold growth can significantly limit additional damage. In the midst of destruction aftermath, with emotions high and the overwhelming nature of the task that lies ahead, it can be difficult to know where to start, but it is critical to ensure that every bit of time and energy is being maximized. For this reason, it is important to establish a triage center immediately after the disaster to direct resources to areas where they can have the maximum impact. Below are some guidelines for ensuring that every effort is applied toward salvaging assets and maximizing impact.

- **Assess the cause of the damage.** Determine which areas have been damaged by rising water and which have been damaged

by rain. Areas damaged by rising water simply cannot be salvaged. Rising water is classified as “black water” (in the same category with sewage) and any porous materials that have been in contact with rising water must be thrown out. In areas wet with rainwater, materials may be dried out, if possible, and cleaned. It is a good idea to investigate a building and to paint or draw a line indicating the level below which rising water has contaminated the area. Above that line, items can be salvaged. Below that line, only cleanup can take place.

- **Target minimally affected areas first.** By starting with the areas that are least damaged by water, workers have the best chance of salvaging items by drying them before mold begins to grow. Materials that are wet but not completely saturated should be placed outdoors (assuming it’s not raining, of course) or in a dry, well-ventilated area.
- **Remove ruined materials.** Below the line indicating rising water damage, workers can begin throwing out furnishings, decorative items, carpet and any materials that are porous. Be sure to document the condition of the materials to support your insurance claim. By removing these items from the building, unsalvageable materials are physically separated. Also, water they have absorbed is taken from the building, reducing the amount of water that must be dried and helping to speed the process.
- **Designate a temporary trash area.** Designate an area outside the building, in the parking lot, in the street or on a far corner of the property, to serve as a temporary disposal area where contaminated materials can be placed while they await delivery to a landfill. This will help ensure that contaminated materials are not mixed with items that may be dried and ensures minimal contact with workers.

### Communication and Organization

Communication and organization are critical in the midst of cleanup activities. Remediation efforts involve multiple players, unfamiliar situations, stressful circumstances and a confusing array of activities. Good communication requires getting important messages out to individuals on-site as to how to best leverage their efforts to make the

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maximum impact and instructing them on how to take precautions to protect their safety and health while working. Organization allows things to go as smoothly as possible and helps make things easier in the long run.

- **Document the damage.** In order to ensure that your insurance company gets all the information it needs to settle your claim, it is important to document the damage. Collect and store information in the form of pictures, videos, samples, logs, notes and moisture maps before beginning any major cleanup efforts, or at least as those efforts proceed.
- **Designate a PR representative.** Keeping the public informed of the situation is critical to maintaining control of the situation, managing your company's image and communicating honest but positive messages about the property for future tenants. Be prepared for media attention and spend some time coming up with a few key messages that will clearly communicate your position on the matter and actions being taken to resolve the situation. It is a good idea to select a couple of point people for this purpose so that communications are handled consistently and well. It may be advisable to initiate contact with the media so that they know who in your organization has information about the state of the building and the progress of the remediation.
- **Contact legal counsel.** Because of the complex nature of the issues and players surrounding a water-intrusion event in a commercial building, litigation can be an issue now or in the future. By contacting legal counsel early, you can avoid potential pitfalls, guarantee that all the necessary information is being collected to ensure that you are able to get every penny you are entitled to from the insurance company, and get advice on general legal issues.
- **Consider the long-term effects.** It is overwhelming to think about all the details involved in restoring a water-damaged building. Although the immediate challenges tend to loom largest, it is important to make decisions in the context of the long term. Improper remediation can result in extensive mold contamination.

This can pose potentially serious health threats to occupants and damage the structural integrity of the building. Drying with excessive heat can "bake" materials, causing them to release high levels of VOCs, polluting the indoor environment. In short, decisions made and actions taken during the remediation process can impact indoor environmental quality and ultimately occupant health and comfort down the road. For this reason, it is critical to conduct activities in a way that will have minimal impact on the indoor environment. It is helpful to select an experienced firm to help oversee this process.

The information included is based on our extensive experience in managing the remediation of water-damaged properties as a result of natural and man-made disasters. It is intended not as a comprehensive remediation plan but rather a sound foundation for assessing the situation and moving toward an effective and affordable solution. We hope this information is helpful and we invite you to contact us if we can be of assistance to you at this challenging time.

Other resources:

- The Institute of Inspection, Cleaning and Restoration Certification. <http://www.iicrc.org/>
- The Federal Emergency Management Agency's "Recovering From and Coping With Flood Damaged Property" Suggestions: <http://www.fema.gov/hazard/flood/coping.shtm>
- The American Red Cross' "Important Steps for Your Safe and Speedy Recovery": <http://www.redcross.org/portal/site/en/menuitem.d229a5fo6620c6052b1ecbf43181aa0/?vgnnextoid=576d3da092c6f110VgnVCM10000089fo870aRCRD>

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