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USC Computer Program Upgrades State's Emergency Response

Natural disasters often produce a confusion which has been equated with the proverbial "fog of war" that military leaders claim can lose battles and cost lives. And like soldiers in battle, nothing is more critical to the state's emergency preparedness agencies than fast, accurate, uninterrupted information.

Recently, a web-based system developed by the University of South Carolina was implemented which links emergency management personnel from across South Carolina with the state's Emergency Preparedness Division's (EPD) hub in Columbia.

The emergency web-site, designated IRIS (Internet Routed Information System), is now considered a critical component of the state's emergency operations.

Agencies such as DSS, SLED, DHEC and the South Carolina National Guard are all linked with EPD, and they now have simultaneous access to updated emergency information during crisis situations.

"We now have more centralized access to information," said Tim Murphy, EPD's manager of response operations. "Everybody sees the same information at the same time. Authorized users can create messages and requests for information. It makes for much clearer communication. Interagency coordination through person-to-person contact is still paramount, and IRIS complements that coordination."

Designed by a team of engineers and computer scientists at USC, the IRIS system was christened during Hurricane Bonnie's "run" in August of 1998.

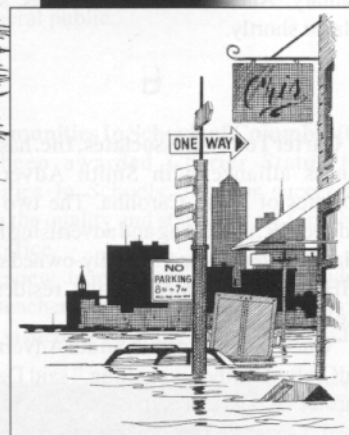
"We used the system extensively during Bonnie," said Murphy. "And much of that effectiveness was due to its simplicity."

That was the idea said Dr. Joe Johnson, a USC physicist and director of the Advanced Solutions Group which developed IRIS.

"We designed it based on the web," he said. "We kept it simple; no bells and whistles."

backups. However, he added, "When you've been shooting a laser gun, it's hard to think about returning to just throwing rocks."

IRIS is not the first system USC's Advanced Solutions Group has designed for government agencies. Based in the



With IRIS, information is accessed 24-hours a day in the form of messages and requests. That information is then categorized by event, location, urgency and other pertinent headings.

Still the system is not foolproof. Like all websites, IRIS is only as good as its dedicated telephone line. Should the phone line fail, the most reliable communication systems would be radio, satellite telephones and runner-delivered handwritten messages.

If there is a failure due to a faulty computer system, Murphy said that the old system of carbon copies and fax machines will still be available as

College of Science and Mathematics, the group has developed database systems for the Justice Department, the Ethics Commission, and the South Carolina Court Administration.

IRIS was developed for the Emergency Preparedness Division by USC, which donated it to the state at no charge.

Interestingly, IRIS was the name given to the rainbow-traveling goddess who, in Greek mythology, relayed messages from the gods to men.

