If your business is in an area that is prone to ideal conditions for tornadoes, you need to be prepared. There are several key steps you can take now that will go a long way toward keeping your employees safe while minimizing damage to your business.

Before a Tornado Strikes – Expect the Unexpected

Tornadoes happen fast and leave little time for you to act. Having a plan with the necessary supplies and information on hand can make an enormous difference in an emergency. Before disaster strikes, make sure you:

• Identify where and to what extent your facility is vulnerable.
• Make known where your employees should seek shelter in the event of present danger.
• Keep names and phone numbers of an electrician, heating contractor, plumber, fire department and building owner easily accessible.
• Do not store gasoline indoors where the fumes could ignite.
• Obtain heavy-duty, outdoor-rated cords to plug in necessary equipment.
• Have an adequate source of weather information, such as a tone alert weather radio to keep informed of weather conditions.
• Have a designated employee responsible for monitoring local radar and warning information during a tornado watch and especially if a tornado warning has been issued for the area.
• Create an emergency kit with important information, first aid items, emergency lighting, chargers and extra batteries as well as food and water.
• Have all employee, vendor and client contact information on hand.
• Protect vital records or relocate them to a safe place off-site. Include business and customer records, utility plans, etc.
• Check your procedure for restoring electrical services on an item-by-item basis.
• Ensure all noncritical and nonessential electrical equipment can be shut down.
• Consider redirecting phone lines to cell phones or an answering service.
• Maintain an inventory of all equipment and assets for your business in the event of structural damage.
• Maintain and test standby electric generator(s) for emergency power.
• Make sure exterior doors, windows and roof hatches close and latch.
• Ensure the contingency plan is up to date in case a tornado disrupts production or other business operations.
Tornado Preparedness

• Identify and remove trees and branches that could fall on building walls, roofs or power lines. Inspect and repair loose or damaged building components such as siding, soffit and fascia, shingles and roofing, brickwork, and brick chimneys.

• If your building does not provide adequate protection and is in a tornado-prone area, work with a contractor to harden a section of your facility or build a safe room.

Watch vs. Warning – Know the Difference

• A tornado watch (being prepared) means that tornadoes are possible and that you should remain alert for approaching storms. You should watch the sky and stay tuned to NOAA Weather Radio, commercial radio or local news for information.

• A tornado warning (taking action) means that a tornado has been sighted or indicated by weather radar and you should take shelter. During a warning, a tornado has been spotted in your area on the ground either in your county or moving toward your county.

During a Tornado – Stay Sheltered in Place

• If you have a storm shelter, get everyone inside. If not, go to the designated safe area of your building. This should be a windowless room, such as an interior bathroom, closet, basement or in the center of the building.

• Avoid taking shelter where there are heavy objects such as refrigerators or large machinery on the section of the floor directly above you.

• Keep employees away from areas with glass.

• Make sure employees and on-site customers are accounted for and safe.

• Patrol the property when safe to do so and watch for pipe breakage, fire or structural damage.

• Disconnect any automatic door openers so that doors can still be opened.

After a Tornado – Assess the Damage and Account for All Personnel

Once safe, use your employee call list and guest sign in sheet to make sure everyone is safe and secure. Then assemble a qualified recovery team to begin getting your business re-established.

The recovery team should include people qualified (including third-party professionals) to repair electrical, mechanical, plumbing and fire protection systems, as well as general maintenance people for cleanup. The team leader should also assess the damage and develop an action plan that addresses priorities including:

• Safety hazards, including downed power lines, exposed electrical wires and leaking gas.

• Structural damage to buildings or damaged foundations.

• Impaired fire protection equipment and alarms.

• Critical production equipment and valuable stock required to restore production.

• Completion of temporary repairs so people can access the building safely.

Returning to Business Safely

• Require strict precautionary measures for any cutting or welding that could spark a gas leak.

• Eliminate any unnecessary ignition sources and enforce “No Smoking” regulations.

• Temporarily repair any roof leaks (consult a qualified contractor if needed) or damage to building walls.

• Take pictures or video of any damage to buildings, their contents, equipment and inventory for insurance purposes.

• Assess and prioritize damaged contents inventory to see what can be salvaged.

• Develop a plan for returning essential equipment back into service. Consult manufacturer guidance for initial start-up.

• Re-establish communication with your vendors and customers to better evaluate potential disruptions.

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Your team will need to assess and repair fire protection equipment, security alarms and sprinkler systems and notify the fire department if any of those systems will be out of service. They should be cautious during electrical restoration and make sure that an electrician has checked, thoroughly dried and tested all systems and equipment before energizing electrical circuits. Any wet insulation should be stripped and replaced. All mechanical equipment and systems should be checked for leaks and damage, and cleaned and dried, as needed. Also, the water supply should be checked for possible contamination.

Be sure to maintain adequate security by performing a continual fire watch until normal operations can resume.

Finally, keep your employees informed about any unsafe conditions and keep them updated on the progress of resuming operations.

Notify NFP right away if you believe you will have a claim to file.

NFP cannot guarantee that all information here will be applicable to every situation. While we use reasonable efforts to ensure accuracy, your situation may require different actions and this article is not a complete list of all possible risk management strategies. We assume no responsibility or liability for an action or inaction taken as a result of this content.