

FOOD SAFETY ISSUES DURING A POWER OUTAGE

How to prepare for it. Guidelines to deal with it.

Food safety is a top priority for food establishments before, during, and after a power outage. To prepare for power outages in the future – which may be due to natural disasters, accidents, or electrical energy supply shortages - the Washoe County District Health Department's food program staff would like to offer several suggestions to prepare for and deal with issues of food safety that food establishments may face.

CRITICAL PROBLEMS/ISSUES THE FOOD MANAGER NEEDS TO ADDRESS

1. Maintaining food product temperatures ("hot" foods held hot, and "cold" foods kept refrigerated or frozen).
2. Interruption of the cooking or cooling process of foods.
3. Lack of adequate lighting for the food personnel to safely continue to prepare and serve food, or enact an emergency "food preservation plan".
4. Liability of a food borne illness associated with the mishandling of food during abnormal conditions.
5. Lack of adequate lighting for customer and personnel safety in areas related to the food establishment (i.e. restrooms, hallways, stairwells, etc.).
6. Lack of ventilation and fire alarm systems while cooking.
7. Lack of hot water for handwashing, cooking, and the dishwashing process.

If problems related to these issues occur in your food establishment during an emergency power outage - and they cannot be corrected in a timely manner – voluntary closure of your operation should occur.

The Washoe County District Health Department staff may conduct inspections of food facilities within the affected geographic area(s). If critical operational problems are found to exist and cannot be resolved, then your health permit will be suspended until such problems can be resolved. To reinstate your permit, call the Washoe County District Health Department at 328-2434 for a re-inspection by a Health Inspector to re-open your business and resume operations.

PLAN AHEAD FOR FOOD SAFETY

Before an emergency occurs, the management of the food establishment should develop a crisis management plan. The plan should include procedures your establishment would use to keep your food, your customers and your personnel safe. This plan would be based on an evaluation of the critical food processes that may need to be altered or stopped.

1. If foods are being prepped on cutting boards: Stop the preparation. Return foods to the appropriate storage units (i.e. walk-in refrigeration, refrigerated prep table, or reach-in refrigerator).
2. If a power outage occurs during the cooking, preparation or cooling process, identify those foods that have been in the **temperature danger zone (45°F to 140°F)** for more than two hours and **discard them**.
3. If foods are being held in/on a hot holding unit, cover the food to maintain safe product temperature (cans of Sterno may be used to maintain temperature). **Check the food temperature regularly.** Hot food must be held at a minimum temperature of 140°F. If the food is held at less than 140°F for two hours or less, it may be re-heated to 165°F. If the food is out of temperature for more than four hours it may be unsafe. **When in doubt throw it out!**
4. All electrical equipment should be checked to determine if surge protection is needed. Certain cooking and cooling equipment may need to be re-programmed after the power outage. This equipment will need to be reset to resume normal use.
5. Consider the use of a portable generator to provide power for the lights, fans, refrigerators and freezers, hot water, dishwasher, etc. during a power outage. If you have a **permanent standby generator** installed, special wiring and a transfer switch is needed to run your circuits. A **portable generator** is limited to selected appliances and circuits. The load limit from a backup generator will help you select what critical items you want to run.
6. Is there a supply of items, such as: battery-powered flashlights, portable radio, cell phone, extra fresh batteries, extra food thermometers, and cans of Sterno available for use during such an emergency? Have flashlights, lanterns, radio, and cell phone positioned at pre-established locations and ready for use.
7. Is there a supply of ice products available (such as ice, dry ice, or chemical ice packs) to keep foods cold? This ice supply may save you from having to discard foods that would have been out of temperature for an extended period of time. **Caution: Using dry ice in confined spaces (i.e. the walk-in box) may substantially reduce the oxygen level.**
8. Refrigerated foods need to be held at a minimum of 45°F or below to prevent spoilage. The ice products listed above can help maintain safe refrigerated temperatures.

SOME SUGGESTED PROCEDURES DURING THE POWER OUTAGE

Keep records of temperatures and recording times for both hot and cold foods during the outage. This will help you make decisions on how to handle the foods.

Keep doors to refrigeration units closed. This will help maintain food temperatures. Place pans of ice, dry ice, or chemical ice packs in the units to keep the food cold.

Turn off appliances and lights which are not needed to prevent damage from a power surge when electrical service is restored.

If a truck with a refrigeration unit is available, it may be used to temporarily house your cold foods.

Check to see if your restrooms have back-up lighting and approved hand-drying materials.

GUIDELINES FOR RE-OPENING A FOOD ESTABLISHMENT

You will need to verify these conditions in your food establishment before resuming food preparation and food service.

1. Adequate lighting is restored in food prep area.
2. All power breakers have been reset (especially at the hot water heater and automatic gas solenoid).
3. Refrigeration and/or freezer units are working and maintaining temperature.
4. Hot holding units are operable.
5. Ventilation system is providing airflow for both intake air and exhaust air.
6. Hot and cold water is working under pressure.
7. Dishwashing machines are operable.
8. Handwashing facilities are operable.
9. Toilet facilities are operable.
10. All potentially hazardous food out of temperature is discarded.
11. Rewash and sanitize food prep surfaces before processing any foods.
12. Foods that were subsequently thawed in freezer units should not be refrozen, but used as soon as possible in your food rotation procedures.