



DISASTER RECOVERY NEWS:

Weather service prepares for disasters with online data backup service

By Dave Raffo, Senior News Director
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Mario Valverde, chief of the Systems Integration Branch of the National Weather Service's Southern Region, knows all too well the role weather can play in forcing companies to implement a disaster recovery plan.

However, meteorologists also realize other events besides weather can make companies scramble to secure critical data. Valverde said his office in Fort Worth, Texas, switched from tape to using DS3 DataVaulting's online backup service in 2005 because it frees up IT staff and makes his data safer and recovery more reliable.

"People take this the wrong way, but if there were a bomb and this place went away and nobody was left here, our data is still preserved and retrievable," Valverde said. "We can download it onto another computer in another location and be up and running in a few hours. Tapes were password protected, and if nobody knew what the password was, all you have is a pile of tape."

Valverde knows that data can be compromised by less catastrophic events, like an outbreak of influenza that sidelines several key employees.

"Our requirements are such that if there's an outbreak here, we need to know that the people providing backup aren't going to be affected by that," he said.

Valverde said DS3's service costs about the same as dealing with tape, but requires less IT intervention and pushes off-site backups farther offsite.

"When we were using tapes, we had one guy spending 10 hours on Mondays changing everybody's tapes out, taking them offsite and bringing the old tapes back," he said. "We got those hours back from the guy doing tapes. And off-site backup for us was a couple of miles up the road. Now we have our stuff stored in two locations in their system."

The Fort Worth office has about 48 people, and uses DS3 to back up about 250 GB of data, such as email and financial information, but not the weather information. Or, as Valverde puts it, using DS3 for "administrative data, not operational data. The National Climatic Data Center (NCDC) keeps weather information that we produce. To us, that data's not useful. It's gone within a couple of hours. Any data we need for accident investigation, we can go to NCDC and get that back," he said.

Since the weather service began using DS3 in 2005, it's gone without any major incidents but has had minor ones.

"Fortunately, we haven't had to use them for massive restore," Valverde said. "We've had instances where somebody lost their email, and we can go get that email. Luckily, that hasn't happened to anybody on the road. The people who lost email were here and our IT people could look at it, so the end user hasn't had to do it."

The weather service does test its disaster recovery plan regularly, though. "We do quarterly evaluations where we pull a few files and make sure they're still good," Valverde said. "That's another problem we had with tape – the additional time to pull stuff off them caused problems. So far, we haven't had any negative things with the tests. When we retrieve data, it's been retrievable, and we've been able to get to it."

Valverde settled on DS3 for his backup after looking at a handful of other providers and doing a 30-day evaluation. He said DS3 provided the best price and customer service.

"We had Iron Mountain come in and they gave an impressive presentation, but they were using the same kind of technology as DS3, and DS3 was cheaper than Iron Mountain," he said.

Valverde also looked at another service provider, but was more impressed with DS3's technology, which is based on Asigra Televaulting software.

Stacy Hayes, chief operating officer, DS3 DataVaulting, said pricing for his service starts at around \$7 per gigabyte per month and is around \$5 for customers backing up terabytes of data. He also said price has become the major selling point for customers.

"In 2001, the notion of people sending their data across the Internet was daunting," Hayes said. "The Internet was the place where viruses and bad things came from. Today, the biggest thing is price. The landscape has changed 180 degrees in last 12 months ago since the economy worsened. Large capital expenditures are harder to come by now, and monthly expenditures are more attractive."