



U.S. National Response Team



TOPOFF 2
National Response Team
Lessons Learned Report
After Action Review:
Issues, Discussion, and
Recommendations

# **THE NATIONAL RESPONSE TEAM**

*Working together to protect Americans from threats to our land, air, and water.*

## **TOPOFF 2 National Response Team Lessons Learned Report After Action Review: Issues, Discussion, and Recommendations**

### **Issue 1: Multiple Emergency Operations Centers (EOCs) Hinder Response Effectiveness**

#### **Discussion:**

- Several EOCs were activated during the exercise (three counties, one city, one state, FBI, and FEMA). As a result, the decision-making process was slowed considerably because data collection and assessment staffs were separated from tactical decision-makers. This geographical distance hampered mitigation efforts. Decisions based on the ever-changing information could not be reconciled efficiently because the exercise players could not easily discuss the relationship nuances of the data and the decisions that needed to be made.

#### **Recommendation:**

- A unified EOC, one each at the local, regional and national levels, should be the standard practice for an incident. This would improve coordination and tactical decision-making.
- The response framework should include an integrated technical data management system that collects, analyzes, reconciles potential differences in interpretation, and arranges for dissemination of incident specific information in a usable format at critical decision points during an incident. Representatives from the environmental, occupational health, medical surveillance, and physical science professions should manage the system, and should be co-located with response decision-makers.

### **Issue 2: National Response Team (NRT)/National Response Center (NRC) Notification Process Needs to be Used During Terrorist Incidents**

#### **Discussion:**

- NRT recommendations from TOPOFF 1 (2000) addressed the NRC serving as the focal point for notifications involving weapons of mass destruction (WMD) incidents and other incidents identified in the National Contingency Plan (NCP). The creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has raised additional questions regarding notification coordination involving DHS, the NRC, the NRT and NCP requirements during terrorist incidents.
- The NRC should have been contacted during the exercise to call NRT members with information regarding the exercise incident and the NRT conference call.

#### **Recommendation:**

- The National Response Center should serve as the focal point for notifications. Events that warrant notification include those that pose a possible threat to public health, safety, and the environment. These events include those involving WMD.
- Given the advent of DHS, the NRT should conduct an internal analysis of the current and future roles, responsibilities and resources of the National Response Center to ensure that the requirements of the NRT and NCP are met.

- **Issue 3: Availability of Assistance and Resources through the NCP and Federal On-Scene Coordinator (FOSC) Prior to a Presidential Disaster Declaration Should Be Recognized**

**Discussion:**

- Under the NCP (40 CFR 300), FOSCs have immediate access to funding and public/private resources without the need for a Presidential Disaster Declaration. While progress has been made since TOPOFF 1, the assets available through the NRS still do not appear to be fully integrated into the Federal WMD response and preparedness community. As a result, all Federal assets may not have been effectively utilized during the early stages of TOPOFF 2, prior to the Presidential Disaster Declaration.

**Recommendation:**

- The Federal WMD response and preparedness community should become fully conversant on how to use all national assets that are immediately available under the NCP to mitigate an incident and incorporate them in WMD planning and response operations. This includes the experience, capability, and resources of FOSCs, the NRT, and the Regional Response Teams (RRTs). This issue was first mentioned in the TOPOFF 1 lessons learned report and was still an issue during TOPOFF 2. Although there have been improvements in this area, additional outreach to other agencies on the authorities and capabilities of the National Response System (NRS) is needed.

**Issue 4: An Integrated Preparedness Program That Includes All Stakeholders Is Needed**

**Discussion:**

- A standard preparedness system is needed, similar to what is done under the NRS, that calls for all (i.e., Federal, state, local, and private) response stakeholders to perform preparedness functions "as a team" at the local, regional, and national level. This would significantly help meet the needs of and effectively use the capabilities of the different response resources, which were often overlooked or not used to their fullest capability during TOPOFF 2.

**Recommendation:**

- Adoption of the concept that "the stakeholders determine the success of a response" by response managers and policy makers is needed. This would allow full stakeholder involvement in assessing capability, exercising, team building, identifying shortfalls and gaps, and developing plans and policies.

**Issue 5: Crisis Communications: Develop a Training Videotape from the Virtual News Network (VNN) Presentation. Establish Website During Major Incidents.**

**Discussion:**

- The TOPOFF 2 VNN presentation was a highly instructive element of the TOPOFF 2 exercise, especially for communicating protective actions by experts and public officials. In January 2002, the NRT approved an action proposal to address issues associated with planning for protective actions and other aspects of crisis communication during terrorist incidents. Some NRT agencies participated in the development of scenarios for the VNN presentation. Unfortunately, the lessons learned information and videotapes on TOPOFF 1 (2000) were not widely available.
- The magnitude of interest by the public and the media for information during a WMD incident strains resources at all levels of government. Joint Information Centers often have difficulty coordinating messages. An internet incident website (not used during TOPOFF 2) has proved

successful several times in the past to help communications to the public and the media during major incidents. For example, in the grounding of the M/V New Carissa in the Coos Bay area off Oregon, the special incident website set up by NOAA received literally hundreds of thousand of 'hits' seeking information.

**Recommendation:**

- The TOPOFF 2 VNN video footage should be edited into a training videotape, which could be distributed to train public officials in crisis communication especially as it applies to protective actions during an emergency. This could be done without compromising security concerns. During TOPOFF 2 important messages were given by government officials, physicians, and experts (from academia and the health professions) regarding public protective actions (e.g., shelter-in-place). Other important information was communicated on the "crawler" at the bottom of the screen telling the public where to obtain important health advisory information (e.g., radiological exposure) on the Internet from state and local health authorities. These examples could benefit public officials and the media as well as serving as general information on TOPOFF 3 which could be shared with the public. A videotape on TOPOFF 2 should be prepared and widely distributed to state and local homeland security stakeholders.
- Establishing an incident website should be standard practice during major incidents. The NRT should consider developing an addendum to the NRT JIC Manual on how to establish such a website.

**Issue 6: Incident Command System (ICS)/Unified Command (UC) Needs To Be Universally Used**

**Discussion:**

- In the TOPOFF 1 (2000) Lessons Learned Report, the NRT recommended that ICS/UC be used at the incident site for WMD releases and other incidents. Much progress has been made since that time, including the recognition in 2003 of ICS in Homeland Security Presidential Security Directive #5 (HSPD-5) and subsequent draft plans (e.g., National Response Plan, National Incident Management System). ICS has been shown to be an effective management system. However, full implementation of ICS was not a part of TOPOFF 2 exercise and would have been an improvement over what was used. A formal structure to implement ICS nation-wide, and outreach, training, and assistance during an incident is needed.

**Recommendation:**

- Efforts should continue to implement ICS/UC on a national level by participating in future plan development and implementation, training, and exercising so that ICS/UC is implemented nationwide. This should include fostering the establishment of incident management teams to assist local responders during major incidents.

**Issue 7: RRT Activation During Terrorist Exercises and Incidents**

**Discussion:**

- EPA reported that RRT 10 was activated via telephone twice during the Seattle portion of the TOPOFF2 exercise. The RRT discussed agency roles and responsibilities as well as being briefed on exercise actions.
- Several NRT members suggested that there should have been an RRT 5 activation for several reasons: (1) to practice activation; (2) to gather information to get the "big picture"; and (3) to communicate to the emergency response community in the region.

**Recommendation:**

- RRT activation should be practiced during every terrorist exercise, and RRTs should be activated during terrorist incidents.

**Issue 8: Maintaining a Common Incident Picture that Supports Tactical Decision Making**

**Discussion:**

- None of the EOCs in Seattle maintained a comprehensive up-to-date incident picture that adequately supported tactical decision-making. Furthermore, the daily EOC briefings did not include a situation picture that provided critical information (e.g., the overall operations picture, logistics, resource status, risk or threat assessments, planning status, media summary, safety and personal protection guidance, etc.). Knowing how to use ICS and team training would have helped here.

**Recommendation:**

- ICS and EOC team training should be implemented to help tactical decision-makers create and maintain an accurate and comprehensive view of the incident.

**Issue 9: When an incident is of national significance, a National Incident Commander should be designated and a Regional and or National Incident Command structure established, much like what is done under the National Contingency Plan and the Coast Guard's Incident Area Command structure.**

**Discussion:**

- Incidents of national significance where the federal government is in a leadership response role often need a senior Agency official to assist the Incident Commander on-scene in communicating with affected parties and the public and coordinating federal, state, local, and international resources at the regional and/or national level. This strategic coordination can be done through an Incident Area Command structure, which, like the rest of the ICS is flexible and easily expandable. The Area Command would involve, as appropriate, national and regional interagency coordination bodies such as the National Response Team (NRT) and Regional Response Teams (RRTs) under the National Contingency Plan, as well as the Governor(s) of affected state(s), and the mayor(s) or other chief executive(s) of local government. This senior agency official usually comes from within the lead agency and works in a position senior to the Incident Commander on scene, but does not compromise the Incident Commander's on-scene authority to direct the response. This construct helps avoid the need for an official from a national level being dispatched to a local position, which could compromise chain of command relationships and discipline between the on-scene, local, regional and national levels.
- The Area Command structure should serve as the primary response management organization at the Area (or regional) level where area level operational and support decisions are made.

**Recommendation:**

- Consider a Spill of National Significance Area Command type management structure for large incidents.

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