

MENDOCINO COUNTY EMERGENCY SERVICES

An Update

March 28, 2012

SUMMARY

Mendocino County (County) is susceptible to a variety of natural disasters. Floods, earthquakes, wild fires and tsunamis have impacted the County in the past and will continue to do so into the future. Through a coordinated effort of dedicated first responders, the County is improving its chances to meet any impending emergency. Upgrades have been made in communications, emergency equipment and training of personnel. A command-and-control center has been set up. County emergency response teams, coupled with valuable non-paid volunteers, are trained to provide emergency services.

County emergency agencies have worked together to improve emergency services throughout the County. In 2005, the "Gang of Five," comprised of leaders of various County emergency agencies, combined grant funding for their individual agencies into the single purchase of a state-of-the-art hazmat vehicle. In early 2012, the City of Ukiah, along with the assistance of other County, cities and concerned citizens, purchased a specialized robot. The robot is available for use by any County emergency agency.

METHOD

The Grand Jury (GJ) interviewed personnel from the Mendocino County Sheriff's Office (MCSO), Mendocino County Department of Transportation (MCDOT), Mendocino County Health and Human Services Agency (HHSA), the staff of a fire department and the United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE). The GJ conducted a site visit to the Emergency Operations Center (EOC). In addition, the GJ visited the County hazardous material vehicle and the Coyote Lake Dam facility. The GJ reviewed the County Emergency Operations Plan (EOP), the Mendocino County Multi-Hazard Mitigation Plan (MHMP), a Tsunami After-Action Report, a 2011 Efficiency Audit of the MCSO and the Sheriff's written response to the audit. The GJ also reviewed the transcript of the Mendocino County Office of Emergency Services (OES) Coordinator's Tsunami presentation to the Board of Supervisors on March 12, 2012.

BACKGROUND

The 2011-2012 GJ chose to investigate how well the County prepares for an emergency. Each year brings an assortment of emergencies that require an immediate response by the County. During 2011, in addition to the usual emergencies, there were several exceptional incidents including a tsunami surge

and an unprecedented manhunt for a suspected killer in a remote coastal area.

The OES is responsible for controlling and directing the effort of emergency organization in the County. In July 2009, the MCSO took over responsibilities of the OES from the Chief Executive Officer. A sergeant, who reports directly to the Sheriff assumed the role of OES Coordinator.

When an emergency is determined, communication/coordination is established between the EOC and an on-scene Incident Commander. The EOC, located in the Sheriff's Department Training Facility in Ukiah, provides a large space equipped with communications equipment, including 10 computers with Internet access. The EOC also includes a conference room with a back-up generator.

Three important factors of dealing with emergencies are:

- Preparation before a disaster hits
- Timely, effective response once the disaster hits
- After-action evaluation

To meet these goals, the Mendocino County Board of Supervisors (BOS) approved the Multi-Hazard Mitigation Plan (MHMP) in January 2008 and the Mendocino County Emergency Operations Plan (EOP) in September 2006. The MHMP, designed to adhere to the congressional Disaster Mitigation Act of 2000, lists a number of potential disasters that the County can face:

- Dam Failure
- Earthquake
- Flood
- Landslides
- Tsunami
- Urban Conflagration
- Windstorm
- Hazardous Material Spills

The Grand Jury reviewed the following agencies to explore how they interface with OES in case of the prior eight possibilities.

Shelters/Disaster Response Team (DRT)

The County may activate the Disaster Response Team (DRT) during emergencies. The DRT primary purpose is setting up emergency shelters. The team is comprised of a DRT Coordinator, assigned to HHSA, who works with HHSA volunteers to assist any County residents in need of emergency shelter. Once activating a shelter site, DRT will stay on site until relieved by Red Cross personnel, who then assume responsibility. During the huge Mendocino County Lightning Complex Fire of 2008, shelters were set up at Willits High School, Fort Bragg High School, Point Arena High School, and at Ukiah Junior Academy.

Redwood Empire Hazardous Incident Team (REHIT)

REHIT is headed by an Operations Chief and composed of personnel from various state and county emergency response teams. In 2005, county agencies combined grant money to purchase a state-of-the-art HAZMAT vehicle for \$265,000. Carried onboard the HAZMAT vehicle is an additional \$250,000 worth of the latest HAZMAT equipment. This includes protective clothing, decontamination equipment and a small lab, used to identify chemical composition on site. In recent years, REHIT has responded to Freon leaks, a helicopter crash scene, numerous fuel spills and meth lab cleanup.

Fire Districts/CalFire

There are 21 fire agencies in the County. Larger fire agencies include salaried fire fighters, EMT and HAZMAT personnel. Smaller fire agencies consist of a fire chief and a roster of volunteers. These volunteer fire districts also provide emergency and ambulance services in rural communities. There are large portions of the County that do not have an assigned fire agency. State funded CalFire augments the County fire fighting capability with the deployment of various aircraft but operates only during the dry, summer months (June thru mid-October). The remainder of the year, there is little or no fire coverage in the outlying areas.

Emergency Medical Services (EMS)

In 1994, Mendocino County joined with Napa and Sonoma Counties to form the Coastal Valleys EMS Agency. The agency, headquartered in Santa Rosa, is responsible for the planning, operation and evaluation of the County EMS system. In that role, Coastal Valleys EMS Agency is to ensure that designated EMS responders are properly certified, conduct periodic ambulance inspections and monitor response times in emergencies. Through recent grant funding, EMS has purchased laptop computers to assist in monitoring patients en route to hospitals. Currently, there is a temporary head of EMS. There has been a reduction in funding with funds shifted to OES and law enforcement.

FINDINGS

1. At the time of this report, the OES Coordinator primarily works alone. Currently, an intern provides occasional assistance.
2. The OES Coordinator has other assigned duties, including being a member of the MCSO Search and Rescue Team, Mutual Aid Coordinator and as Communications Leader.
3. The OES Coordinator is pro-active in providing information concerning OES. He has arranged with all five county radio stations to broadcast public service messages in regards to emergency services. On March 12, 2012, the OES

- Coordinator spoke before the BOS to promote tsunami awareness. The BOS named the week of March 25-31, 2012 as "Tsunami Preparedness Week".
4. The OES Coordinator has proven proficient in grant writing. Currently, the County has secured four grants totaling approximately \$400,000 a year.
 5. The EOC was not used during the March 2011 tsunami surge in which Noyo Harbor suffered substantial pier damage.
 6. California National Guard personnel effectively utilized the EOC as a Command-and-Control Center during "Operation Full Court Press", a three-week long multi-agency marijuana operation during the months of July and August 2011.
 7. The GJ learned that the telephone emergency warning system, "Reverse 911", has proven to be effective in emergencies. In 2011, the County paid \$35,000 to contract for this service. There are plans to submit a formal Request for Proposal for this service beginning 2013-2014.
 8. The "Gang of Five" authorized individual agency funding for a year to purchase the HAZMAT vehicle. The HAZMAT team is comprised of personnel from County fire agencies and various state agencies (CalFire/Cal Trans/CHP). REHIT operates on an annual grant funding of \$278,000.
 9. REHIT responded to 22 incidents in 2011 and 6 incidents during the first quarter of 2012.
 10. Meth lab cleanup transportation costs will no longer be financed by the state.
 11. The County paid \$228,000 in overtime pay to MCSO personnel during the Fort Bragg manhunt.
 12. In early 2012, a proposed Assembly Bill, AB1863, requested the State reimburse Mendocino County for costs involved in the Fort Bragg manhunt. The bill would also ensure that emergency funds be made available to rural areas for such incidents in the future.
 13. An audit, paid through MCSO, questioned whether there was a need for a sergeant's position to staff the OES.
 14. The audit recommended that OES revert to staffing by the CEO's office.
 15. Countywide communications have vastly improved over the past few years. Seven microwave towers, located within Mendocino County, have replaced the older and ineffective "repeater system" that made communications with the south coast difficult and problematic.
 16. By January 2013, all emergency agencies will have to adhere to the federally mandated "narrow banding" of all frequencies within Mendocino County. The narrowing of the band could cut down effectiveness 10% to 25%.
 17. In 2012, the County purchased four tsunami-warning sirens from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Office. These sirens will be placed in low-lying areas susceptible to tsunamis. Two sirens are to be installed at Noyo Harbor and one at Point Arena by May 2012. The fourth siren, partially funded by the City of Fort Bragg, will be installed later in the Pudding Creek Area of Fort Bragg.
 18. Each spring, the counties of Mendocino, Humboldt and Del Norte participate in a coordinated "Live Code" exercise, which simulates an impending tsunami. Other agencies involved include the California Emergency

Management Agency and the West Coast Tsunami Warning Center. The scheduled date in 2012 was March 28.

19. An after-action report of the March 2011 tsunami reported there were several minor glitches involving inter-agency communication regarding road closures along Highway 1.
20. The local EMS Agency is mandated by the State to implement and enforce the provisions of the safety code in order to promote effective and efficient pre-hospital care. This is accomplished by providing certification and accreditation in monitoring training programs and investigating complaints. Funding has been a long-standing problem.
21. The Emergency Operations Plan (EOP), completed in 2006, is outdated.
22. Debris from last year's Japanese earthquake/tsunami is expected to wash ashore along the Mendocino coastline in 2013. There is no state or federal funding for cleanup costs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The GJ recommends that:

1. The BOS approve a full time assistant position to the Office of Emergency Service Coordinator. (Findings 1-2)
2. Retain the position of Office of Emergency Service Coordinator under the direction of the MCSO. (Finding 13-14)
3. Utilize the Emergency Operations Center during any emergency. (Finding 5-6)
4. The BOS provide sufficient funding to the Emergency Medical Service to perform mandated training, certification, public education, and preparedness of emergency personnel. (Finding 20)
5. The Emergency Operations Plan, approved by the BOS in 2006, be updated. (Finding 21)

DISCUSSION

Earthquakes are a constant threat to the County. Of primary concern is the Cascadian Subduction Zone, located off the northern Mendocino Coast and extending northward to the Canadian border. Geologists feel there is a strong chance for a potential 8.0 earthquake/tsunami to be generated from this fault zone within the next 50 years.

Small fault lines are found close to the Coyote Dam site, which is administered/managed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE). To monitor seismic activity at the dam site, USACE has installed two earthquake-

detecting devices (accelerator graphs) referred to as seismic monitoring stations. One is located along the bottom and another at the top of the 160 feet high, 3,500 feet-long, earth-filled dam. Any reading of 5.0 on the Richter scale activates a warning signal/siren at the dam as well as the nearby administration building. There has never been a 5.0 reading at the dam, completed in 1959, whose primary function is flood control.

Recent tremors of 5.0 or above have been determined in the upper reaches of the Hayward Fault.

The most notable emergency faced by the County in 2011 was one not found in any mitigation handbook. This was a manhunt conducted in rugged terrain outside the City of Fort Bragg for the suspected murderer of two victims. MCSO requested outside assistance to track the suspect. Over 40 county, state and federal law enforcement agencies responded to join in the 36-day manhunt.

While many aspects of emergency services are improving, there are still numerous concerns facing the County:

1. The absence of a second access road in Brooktrails in case of a large wildfire
2. State funding for the transportation of meth lab cleanup is becoming non-existent
3. Cutbacks in pay and hours worked may result in fewer DRT workers
4. Numerous dams in the county are aging and are in need of repair:
 - a) Mill Pond (1885)
 - b) Van Arsdale (1907)
 - c) Mendocino Middle (1908)
 - d) Mendocino Three Upper (1915)
5. Local fire agencies are incurring financial/personnel problems (e.g., the fire station in Willits needs replacing but lacks the financing)
6. Off-season wildfires pose a problem without local CalFire presence
7. Financial inadequacies are facing county ambulance providers

REQUIRED RESPONSES:

Mendocino County Board of Supervisors (All Findings; All Recommendations)

Mendocino County CEO (All Findings; All Recommendations)

Mendocino County Sheriff (All Findings; All Recommendations)

Mendocino County Office of Emergency Services: (All Findings; All Recommendations)

Mendocino County Office of Health and Human Services Agency (Findings 8-10, 19-20; Recommendation 4)