

The Cerro Grande Fire of 2000

SUMMARY OF MATTERS TO BE CONSIDERED BY THE LOS ALAMOS COUNTY COUNCIL, DECEMBER 16, 2002

These discussion items are drawn from “The Cerro Grande Fire of 2000,” a report prepared by James S. Griffiths for the Los Alamos County Office of Emergency Management, March 2002.

Purpose of the Report

- To create an historical record of the incident for the County;
- To identify “lessons learned” for planning purposes;
- To provide guidance to other jurisdictions in similar situations.

The Report should be distributed to State and County Emergency Management offices, the National Emergency Management Association, the International Association of Emergency Managers, the International City/County Management Association, and the City of Oakland, California.

EMERGENCY PHASE

Lessons learned

- Fire, Police, and other County operations were generally well conducted. County agencies and their employees carried out their duties with commitment and dedication. No significant cause for “fault finding” pointing to individuals or County departments arose during the after-action review, although several procedural shortcomings surfaced.
- The then County Emergency Management Plan, calling for key County personnel to operate in the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) Emergency Operations Center (EOC), did not work well.

The Plan has been rewritten, simplified, and provides for adequate management and representation in the County EOC pending opening of the Joint LANL/County EOC. The revised Plan was approved by Council in June 2001, and establishes the County’s Emergency Management policies and basic procedures.

- Operation of two EOC’s – one at LANL, one at the County – resulted in confusion and duplication.

State officials were troubled and confused by requests coming from both the County EOC and the LANL EOC.

A joint EOC is now planned to open, on a Laboratory site, in September 2003. It is expected to bring about a true “joint” operation. As in interim procedure, arrangements are in place to have a high-level LANL official in the County EOC, and vice versa.

See Recommendation #1.

The Cerro Grande Fire of 2000

- The customary written delegation of emergency powers from the Chair, County Council, to the County Administrator was implemented and worked well. This delegation proved to be one of most effective moves the County could have made.

The delegation as written, however, is actually extremely limited in scope (“...direct the operations of the EOC”) and may be without legal authority. The Council later found it necessary to pass legislation retroactively approving all actions taken by the Administrator.

See Recommendation #2.

- The automated telephone citizen notification system used, the Community Alert Network System (CANS) was not as effective as desired.

CANS has been replaced with Emergency Preparedness Notification System, operated by Qwest, and appears to be a better system.

- Large-scale Mutual Aid agreements for firefighting, and other services, were not in place. State efforts to implement firefighting mutual aid were slow and inefficient. The County had to make its own ad hoc mutual aid arrangements for services other than Fire.

See Recommendation #3.

- Scheduled daily meetings by the Council with the County Administrator worked well.
- Distributing information to the public and meeting with the public are critical factors, and should be emphasized in planning for future incidents. The practice of Council members talking with the public in shelters and meeting returning evacuees were found to be especially helpful.

See Recommendation #4.

- Animal Control, specifically care of pets when the town was evacuated, became a major issue.

Tentative Mutual Aid agreements, prompted by the State Department of Agriculture, have been discussed by County Animal Control personnel and Santa Fe City and County.

- Tracking and registering evacuees proved to be a big problem.

Evacuees should be encouraged to register via Internet on the County website or by telephone with a designated County office. The website should be configured to accept a large number of registrants, and to receive additional input from telephoned messages.

- Donated food, clothing, services, and materiel exceeded needs and was uncontrolled.

See Recommendation #5.

The Cerro Grande Fire of 2000

- Amateur radio operators provided exceptional service, including contributing services beyond communications.
- The American Red Cross national response personnel were very difficult to work with, and declined to coordinate any of their activities with the County. Local Red Cross personnel initially provided their usual good services, but were completely ignored by the national level team.
- The County's various radio systems were designed for routine minimal operational demands. Interoperability within the County and with out-of-town supporting services was, and continues to be, a problem.

See Recommendation #6.

RECOVERY PHASE

Lessons Learned

- Creation of the Public Information Telephone Center was one of most effective steps taken during the entire operation. Fifty phone lines were placed in operation within a matter of hours, and handled over 7,000 calls in the first day.
- Emergency Management "news bulletins" proved to be a very effective means of getting timely updates to County officials, the media, and the public. These announcements addressed fire and law enforcement/security operations, status of utilities and other services, road closings and openings, volunteer operations, and store openings. The announcements were managed by Emergency Management from the EOC and were produced several times a day; new items were highlighted. The bulletin served as the coordinated official source for Public Information releases and provided background for interviews given by County officials.
- The County Joint Service Center was conceived to be the center for recovery operations by returning residents. It was considered very important to let returning residents know that their County leadership was doing everything possible to mitigate the situation and get back to normal operations. For that reason, the County made sure all supporting relief agencies were housed in one building. The goal was to provide a "one-stop" service under managed by the County. The operation was well received by residents.

The American Red Cross, and to a lesser extent, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, were reluctant to be housed with any other agencies or with each other. Only strong direction by a County manager kept the Red Cross functioning as part of the Joint Service Center.

- The decision to bring in managers from the City of Oakland (California), which had experienced a major conflagration in the recent past, was a good one. Their list of actions taken and advice was invaluable in ensuring we were doing all that should be done.

The Cerro Grande Fire of 2000

- A major lesson learned was how to transition from Emergency to Recovery Operations. This was accomplished by creating the Recovery Planning Group, which operated under the direction of the Emergency Manager. It was composed of department manager-level personnel, and met daily, usually for several hours. Its charter was to consider all problems from the residents' perspective. Second-level personnel continued staffing the EOC during the period the two groups overlapped. Creation of this group was one of the better decisions made during the operation.
- Council, acting on staff recommendations, approved legislation on debris removal and temporary housing. These were perhaps the two most key issues earlier in the recovery process.
- The Federal Burned Area Emergency Rehabilitation (BAER) Team provided major assistance in addressing damage to the watershed area.
- County management was instrumental in getting the "Cerro Grande Fire Assistance Act" through Congress. This was a much-needed piece of legislation that provided both short and long-range relief to the County and its citizens.
- Community Development was given the responsibility for leading the long-term recovery and redevelopment efforts, an assignment which was/is being carried out effectively.

ACTIONS REQUIRED OR RECOMMENDED

1. Pending opening of the Joint LANL/County EOC, Emergency Management should ensure LANL communications with the State EOC go through the County EOC in accordance with standard national Emergency Management protocols. This does not mean LANL should not communicate directly with DOE on specialized matters, but is meant to keep general emergency management issues within usual channels.
2. The County Attorney should provide corrective wording to facilitate a full delegation of emergency powers from the Chair, County Council, to the County Administrator. If such delegation is determined to not be legally permissible, the Attorney should draft appropriate enabling legislation.
3. County leadership should take the initiative in establishing statewide mutual procedures through the Municipal League. Such agreements should cover not only Fire, but Law Enforcement, Animal Control, Public Works, Utilities, and all customary municipal services.

Factors to be considered include, for example, liability, per-diem, travel, salary, overtime, and fuel and equipment costs. Agreements in this area can range from sending whatever is needed with the supporting jurisdiction responsible for all costs and liability to a plan where all costs and liability are shifted to the requesting jurisdiction.

The County Administrator should review Animal Control mutual aid arrangements that have been/are being put in place to ensure they are in accordance with current County policies. Further, those arrangements should be folded into any statewide mutual aid procedures produced by the Municipal League.

The Cerro Grande Fire of 2000

4. County staffing should be expanded to provide for at least one, preferably two, persons cross-trained to function as adjunct Public Information Officers during extended emergency operations.
5. The County Emergency Management Plan designates Volunteer Coordination (including donated items as well as services) as a primary function. In accordance with the Plan, the County Administrator should appoint a County employee to be responsible for that now unassigned function.
6. The County needs to have a coordinated radio/data communications system that emphasizes interoperability. While that is a long-term, and probably expensive goal, it will be necessary to put some short-range “band-aid” fixes in place to provide minimal interoperability.