



2007 Southern California Wildfires After Action/Corrective Action Report



July 2008

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CALIFORNIA EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY

2007 SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA WILDFIRES AFTER ACTION / CORRECTIVE ACTION REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In California, as part of the Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS), statute requires the Governor's Office of Emergency Services (OES) to produce an After Action Report (AAR) within 120 days after each declared disaster indicating that, "This report shall review public safety response and disaster recovery activities." The supporting SEMS regulations require jurisdictions "declaring a local emergency for which the governor proclaims a state of emergency, and any state agency responding to that emergency, shall complete and transmit an after action report to OES within ninety (90) days of the close of the incident period." The close of the incident period for the 2007 Southern California Wildfires was March 31, 2008. The purpose of this reporting requirement is to capture response and recovery efforts, lessons learned, and corrective action recommendations before critical data is lost due to the passage of time.

The 2007 Southern California Wildfires event strongly tested California's emergency management capabilities, systems, and resources, specifically in the areas of interagency coordination, wildfire suppression, mass evacuation, and mass care and sheltering. The overall evaluation of the state's response to the event was very positive, from both the public's point of view and the responding governmental, private entities, and federal entities. California's strong and established SEMS that includes the Fire Mutual Aid System, coupled with a robust and well-organized local government operations, proved vital to the success in responding to this event.

Note: Effective January 1, 2009, OES and the Office of Homeland Security (OHS) were merged into a single agency called the California Emergency Management Agency (CalEMA). However, since this incident occurred prior to the merger, this document will continue to reference OES.

Description of Event

On Saturday, October 20, 2007, the first of many fires began in Southern California. Driven by strong Santa Ana winds gusting up to 100 miles per hour, the adverse weather conditions in Southern California helped fan a total of 24 fires in seven counties into raging firestorms within a few days. By Sunday afternoon, OES fully activated the Southern Regional Emergency Operation Center (REOC) and the State Operation Center (SOC).

By early Monday morning, October 22, 2007, key state and federal agencies with emergency response roles ranging from traffic control to mass shelter operations had arrived at the SOC and Southern REOC to commence operations. The list of participating state agencies is included at the end of this Executive Summary. Details of the participating agencies disaster-related activities are included in the full After Action Report.

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On Monday, October 22, 2007, the day the fires began spreading across Southern California, the Joint Field Office (JFO) was established in Pasadena co-locating the OES and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to begin planning, strategizing, and coordinating federal, state, tribal, and local recovery operations throughout Southern California.

Local Assistance Centers (LAC) opened on October 24, 2007, to provide services to individuals who were impacted by the fires. The Governor personally visited a number of these centers to ensure people's needs were being met, including Qualcomm Stadium, Steele Canyon School, El Toro High School, Escondido High School and Cuyamaca College. These centers were managed by local government and supported by state and federal agencies, as well as private non-profits and insurance companies. Nine of the centers were subsequently transitioned to either FEMA operated Disaster Recovery Centers (DRC) or the United States Small Business Administration (SBA) Disaster Loan Outreach Centers (DLOC).

Over the next two weeks, these emergency management stakeholders remained at their posts in various locations in support of local and tribal governments. The three primary objectives were controlling the fires, evacuation of large populations (in total these were the largest in California history), and providing support for mass care and shelter operations, including those conducted at Qualcomm Stadium and Del Mar Park in San Diego.

As the fires were brought under control and shelter populations dropped, emergency response activities transitioned to the Recovery Phase with the scale down of the SOC on November 4, 2007. Multi-agency fire recovery activities continued in the fully staffed JFO.

Multi-Agency Support Teams were established to assist with the following issues: providing housing to displaced residents, expediting the safe removal of disaster-related debris, and assisting impacted tribal jurisdictions with locating supplemental resources, including Public Assistance and Individual Assistance. In addition, a state-federal Burn Area Multi-Agency Support Group (MASG) was deployed to the city of Colton in San Bernadino county to assist with recovery efforts by addressing, in an environmentally sensitive manner, flooding, erosion, and debris flow concerns that were a direct result of the declared fires.

Dates of Operations:	<u>Response:</u> October 21 through November 4, 2007 <u>Recovery:</u> concluded March 31, 2008
Total Fire Incidents:	24 in seven counties
Counties Involved:	Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, San Diego, Santa Barbara, and Ventura
Total Acres Burned:	522,514
Human Fatalities:	10
Human Injuries:	139
Structures Destroyed:	3,290
Structures Damaged:	292

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Residences Destroyed:	2,282
Number Persons Sheltered:	22,195
Number Shelters:	54
Total County Reported Evacuations Ordered:	592,500

Proclamations and Declarations

Local Proclamation: Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, San Diego, Santa Barbara, and Ventura counties; cities of Irvine, San Jacinto, and Banning.

Governor's Proclamation: Issued on October 21, 2007, for Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, San Diego, Santa Barbara, and Ventura counties.

Presidential Declaration: On October 24, 2007, the President declared a disaster, FEMA-1731-DR-CA, for all counties included in the Governor's Proclamation.

Summary of Successes

Successful operations were highlighted in the following areas: efficient resource deployment; effective fire suppression and control, notification and alert, and sheltering operations; and well organized and rapid communications and coordination between state agencies and local governments, public/private partnership, and state/federal partnership.

- State and local agencies throughout California responded in a very timely and efficient manner. The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE), the United States Forest Service (USFS), and local government pre-deployed engines, aircraft, and personnel to Southern California in advance of the fires. The military leaned forward aggressively with a variety of aviation assets; the California National Guard (CNG) responded quickly with its available firefighting helicopters, some of which provided real-time imagery for incident managers.
- State qualified staff were deployed to assist with shelter service assessments and communications opportunities. In addition, there was a well-coordinated volunteer identification and deployment that supported local shelter efforts. The "Reverse 911" telephone emergency notification systems and public notification systems for evacuation played a key role in alerting residents and providing timely life-safety information.
- OES had all of its assigned equipment in Southern California within the first 24 hours. There was a strong inter-agency coordination and relationships between local, state, and federal agencies that played an instrumental role in responding to this emergency. Access to all key agencies in one location (SOC/REOC) was extremely valuable. Unified command concepts were applied and state personnel were matched to their federal counterparts.

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- OES, CAL FIRE and other state personnel performed in an outstanding fashion in unprecedented circumstances. Staff was stretched beyond capacity and capability in many cases, but demonstrated flexibility, dynamics, and professionalism throughout the response.
- Public-private partnerships were stronger in this emergency than in any prior emergency and were critical in the response. The exchange of knowledge, process, and capabilities between the public and private sector worked well to support local resources.
- Emergency Management Mutual Aid (EMMA) was used more extensively than in any other disaster. This disaster resulted in the largest integration of federal and state agencies at a JFO to date to support the needs of the local government and affected communities.
- The LACs provided a central place for disaster survivors to talk face-to-face with numerous state and local agency representatives, elected and local officials, and insurance companies.
- Pairing state regional representatives with federal division supervisors by county worked well in identifying local needs, resolving issues, and keeping the JFO informed. This joint effort demonstrated that FEMA and the state are true partners, equating to shared responsibility and maximum available resources.

Summary of Areas Needing Improvements

In general, the management of this disaster went very well, especially considering the effect it had on the seven counties impacted by the many fires. However, as in any disaster, improvements can be made to bolster California's future response to disasters.

Improvements are recommended in the following areas: additional staffing and training at state, local, and regional levels; additional fire fighting resources; additional funding for emergency response operations; enhanced data and information management tools; better pre-positioning of state resources for fire suppression and evacuation and sheltering operations; and improved regional Emergency Operations Center (EOC) facility conditions. The following are examples of some of the issues that need to be resolved to improve future disaster response.

- There was minimal planning and preparedness for sheltering people with disabilities (i.e. lack of non-medical personal assistance, accessible cots, accessible transportation, specialized equipment).
- Several state agencies reported a shortage of trained staff, making it difficult to maintain expected staffing levels concurrently (i.e. DOC, field assignment, EOC, REOC, SOC, and JFO).
- State resources were deployed in a "leaning forward" strategy that at times caused confusion at the local level.

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- Although the United States (US) Health and Human Services (HHS) assigned responsibility for public health preparedness to the state, tribal leaders preferred to work with the federal government in lieu of available state public health assistance.
- Multiple points of information gathering, including multiple field and assessment teams, working outside established response networks/systems resulted in overlapping information, mismatched data and reports, and redundant staff efforts in some areas.
- Current data management tools, especially the Response Information Management System (RIMS), are inadequate to meet the demands of today's emergency management needs.
- There is a need to address mitigation to avoid or reduce fire emergencies. Addressing building restrictions, building codes, defensible space, and public education will help to prevent fires from starting and spreading.
- OES engines were critical in getting in place in the first stages of the fires, but there are a limited number of engines that can be deployed to a large number of fires.
- There is a need for additional state firefighters to increase staffing of fire engines from three to four firefighters per engine. NOTE: This was addressed in the Governor's 2008-09 Fiscal Year Budget.
- The manufactured homes brought into California by FEMA were extremely large and equipped with a 200 amp electrical system. The homes were too wide to be transported into many areas where they were needed and in many cases could not be installed in existing mobile parks without major upgrades to the parks electrical system.
- Transitioning medically fragile/vulnerable populations to alternate facilities/shelters needs improvement.
- There is a need for greater federal military coordination to allow for timely deployment of federal military assets during disasters. This includes developing a closer relationship with military personnel. There is a need to provide SEMS training to military staff (Marines) to avoid having assets going outside of our system. NOTE: A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed with the United States Marine Corps in January 2008 and the Governor has met with the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) and the United States Northern Command (USNORTHCOM) to build on California's successful partnership with the US military in continued coordinated efforts in response to emergencies.
- Inability to track emergency resources affected the state's ability to re-deploy emergency equipment. CAL FIRE's tracking system does not have the ability to track flight times of aerial assets in order to re-deploy them effectively.
- OES staff have a lack of experience related to mobilizing/ordering federal assets through Emergency Support Function (ESF) 4.

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- There is a need for more CAL FIRE helicopter managers, or “spotters”, to handle the federal helicopter assets. NOTE: CAL FIRE has increased its number of available military helicopter managers to comply with the federal mandates while utilizing military assets.
- California Air National Guard (ANG) does not yet have USFS Modular Airborne Fire Fighting System (MAFFS) equipment stationed in California that is compatible with existing California ANG C130J aircraft. There are no interstate agreements currently existing between California and Wyoming or North Carolina to facilitate the state’s request of ANG C130H model aircraft for use during a state emergency. NOTE: MAFFS resources are not subject to deployment through Emergency Management Assistance Compact.
- There is no statewide shelter categorization system to identify available beds in General Acute Care Hospitals, Skilled Nursing Facilities (SNF), and Intermediate Care Facilities (ICF).
- The telephone emergency notification system (Reverse 911) did not address non-English speaking persons or the hearing impaired.

Summary of Corrective Action Recommendations

Recommendations to address some of these needed improvements may require legislative actions and budget change proposals to address additional staffing, equipment, and funding. Training is critical at both the state and local levels in part due to turnover in emergency management staff that results in the continual need for training new staff. In addition, large disasters requiring multi-agency coordination can be infrequent in nature, and it is difficult and expensive to simulate exercises that achieve the desired coordination. The following are examples of some of the recommended measures that need to be taken to resolve existing problems:

- Enhance SEMS training at all levels of government.
- A review of the SEMS structure is needed to ensure the integration of disability resources and services into response and recovery activities.
- Emergency management training, including SEMS/National Incident Management System (NIMS)/Incident Command System (ICS), at all levels of state government needs to be enhanced.
- Communicate the "leaning forward" approach and philosophy to local government stakeholders.
- Develop protocols for local, state, and federal interaction with Tribal entities on medical-health issues.

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- A Feasibility Study Report (FSR) is required to document the results of the problem or the opportunity that may be addressed using information technology. This may lead to the development of a statewide data management system that will meet the current needs and demands.
- Develop and implement better land use planning and prevention templates, laws, and ordinances to address fire mitigation.
- Increase the OES Fire Engine Program by 100 percent. With this increase in engines, there would be more flexibility on placing them throughout the Regions with the highest urban/wild land interface fire hazards. NOTE: The Governor has proposed an Emergency Response Initiative to fund critical emergency resources without impacting the State's General Fund. The Initiative would place a small fee on residential and commercial insurance policies.
- There needs to be coordination between FEMA, the California Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD), and the local building departments concerning manufactured home standards, transportation, electrical needs, etc.
- The state should pursue methods to address development of comprehensive local sheltering plans for residents that include meeting the needs of people with disabilities and older adults. These should include a clear definition of roles and responsibilities.
- Continue to work with the US Military to enhance communication and coordinate assets in response to emergencies.

ORGANIZATIONS CONTRIBUTING TO THIS REPORT

State Agencies and Departments

California Air Resources Board
California Conservation Corps
California Department of Conservation
California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation
California Department of Fish and Game
California Department of Food and Agriculture
California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE)
California Department of Health Care Services
California Department of Housing and Community Development
California Department of Mental Health
California Department of Parks and Recreation (State Parks)
California Department of Public Health
California Department of Rehabilitation
California Department of Social Services
California Department of Transportation
California Environmental Protection Agency
California Highway Patrol
California National Guard
Department of Motor Vehicles
Department of Water Resources
Emergency Medical Services Authority
Employment Development Department
Franchise Tax Board
Governor's Office of Emergency Services

Local Government/Operational Areas (OAs)

Los Angeles County
Orange County
Riverside County
City of San Diego
San Diego County
San Bernardino County

Private/Non-profit Organizations

Business Executives for National Security (BENS)
California Grocers Association
San Diego 2-1-1
California 2-1-1