

# **CALIFORNIA EMERGENCY MANGEMENT AGENCY**

## **2008 SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA FIRES AFTER ACTION / CORRECTIVE ACTION REPORT**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

In California, as part of the Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS), statute requires the California Emergency Management Agency (Cal EMA), formerly known as the Governor's Office of Emergency Services (OES), to produce an After Action Report (AAR) after each declared disaster to 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, to complete and transmit an AAR to Cal EMA following the close of the incident period. The close of the incident period for the 2008 Southern California Fires was November 28, 2008. In addition, federal law under the National Incident Management System (NIMS) requires states to prepare an AAR and Corrective Action Report following a disaster or federally funded exercise. 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 2008 Southern California Fires event once again tested Southern California's emergency management capabilities, systems, and resources. This AAR describes the impact of three fires that occurred almost simultaneously in five Southern California counties. These fires included the Tea Fire in Santa Barbara County, the Sayre Fire in Los Angeles County, and the Freeway Complex Fire which involved several fires located in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Bernardino Counties that merged into one large fire.

It should be noted that Southern California has been adversely affected by three fire sieges that occurred in October and November 2003, November 2007, and November 2008. Each of these fire sieges were caused by a combination of the Santa Ana winds and drought conditions. As with the preceding fires, the overall evaluation of the State's response to the 2008 Southern California Fires was very positive, from both the public's point of view and the responding governmental, private, and federal entities. Due to California's strong and established SEMS structure that includes the use of the Fire Mutual Aid System in conjunction with robust and well-organized local government operations, this emergency was responded to successfully in a short period of time. Lessons learned from the previous fire sieges enabled California's emergency managers to implement corrective actions that have continually improved California's fire fighting response capabilities thereby improving California's overall emergency response system.

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. This report will reference Cal EMA when describing activities associated with this disaster.

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**Description of Event**

In November 2008, Southern California was once again devastated by wildland fires. The 2008 Southern California Fires consisted of three separate large fires fueled by extreme Santa Ana winds, low humidity, and a prolonged drought. On November 13, 2008, the first of these devastating fires, the Tea Fire, was ignited in the Montecito area of Santa Barbara County. By the time this fire was contained, 1,940 acres had burned and 210 residences were destroyed. The following day, November 14, 2008, the Sayre Fire started in the community of Sylmar in Los Angeles County and began spreading rapidly. The Sayre Fire burned 11,262 acres and destroyed 487 homes before it was fully contained. Then on November 15, 2008, several smaller fires ignited within Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Bernardino Counties. The Freeway Fire ignited in the City of Corona, but quickly spread to Yorba Linda, while the Landfill Fire ignited in the Carbon Canyon area. These fires spread rapidly and merged to form the Freeway Complex Fire. This fire raged out of control and burned 30,305 acres before containment and a total of 187 homes were destroyed and another 127 homes were damaged within the four county area.

By November 13, 2008, Santa Barbara County declared a local emergency due to the Tea Fire and requested the Governor to proclaim a State of Emergency on their behalf. The Governor proclaimed a State Of Emergency for Santa Barbara County on November 14, 2008. On November 14, 2008, Los Angeles County declared a local emergency due to the Sayre Fire and requested a State Proclamation. As a result, the Governor proclaimed a State of Emergency for Los Angeles County on November 15, 2008. Then on November 15, 2008, Orange and Riverside Counties declared local emergencies based on the impact of the Freeway Fire and requested a State Emergency. The Governor proclaimed a State of Emergency for Los Angeles County and Riverside County on November 15, 2008. Finally, on November 16, 2008, San Bernardino declared a local emergency due to the unexpected growth of the Freeway Complex Fire into the City of Chino Hills. The Governor proclaimed a State of Emergency on November 17, 2008 for San Bernardino County.

In addition to the proclamation of a State of Emergency for each of the impacted counties, on November 17, 2008, Governor Schwarzenegger requested a Presidential declaration of a Major Disaster for the State of California for the five counties experiencing the devastating effects of the fire siege. The President declared a Major Disaster (DR-1810) in the counties of Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside and Santa Barbara for the fires beginning November 13, 2008. The Federal declaration provided individual assistance, public assistance (debris removal and emergency protective measures), and hazard mitigation. However, it did not cover permanent repair costs for damaged infrastructure. San Bernardino County was not included in the declaration because it did not meet the threshold required to qualify for the federal assistance. However, San Bernardino County received Fire Management Assistance Grant (FMAG) funding from FEMA to reimburse the cost of fire suppression activities associated with the Freeway Complex Fire.

Local Assistance Centers (LACs) began opening on November 18, 2009 to assist victims of the Freeway Complex, the Sayre, and Tea Fires. Orange County opened a LAC in Anaheim; Los

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Angeles County opened LACs in Sylmar and Brea; and Santa Barbara County opened a LAC in Santa Barbara. These LACs provided centrally located services for a range of services that are provided by state, federal and local agencies. These services are aimed at assisting individuals with obtaining necessary information they need to recover from the disaster, such as the replacement of vital documents.

State Emergency Assessments Teams (SEATs) worked with the Operational Areas to coordinate the assessments of the burned areas. These teams consisted of representatives from the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protections (CAL FIRE), California Geological Survey, Department of Water Resources, Department of Fish and Game, Department of Parks and Recreation, and the Regional Water Quality Control Board. The SEAT members concentrated on addressing the post fire risk to lives and property that could arise during the coming rainy season. The combined effects of vegetation loss and the effect on soils from fire, created conditions that greatly increased the threat of flooding, erosion and debris/mud flow in the impacted areas. The SEAT members identified hazards and subsequent mitigation efforts that could be used to reduce but not entirely eliminate all risk from the identified hazards. SEAT assessments were completed for the Freeway Complex, Sayre, and Tea Fires.

Cal EMA, in conjunction with CAL FIRE, established Multi-Agency Support Teams to assist with the following issues: providing housing to displaced residents and expediting the safe removal of disaster-related debris. In addition, Cal EMA, the California Resources Agency, and the California Environmental Protection Agency had already formed a multi-state agency State Emergency Assessment Team (SEAT) Operational Support Group (SOS) to assist with the 2008 Mid-Year California Fires. This group was still performing SEAT activities when the 2008 Southern California Fires occurred in November 2008. The SOS Group was responsible for coordinating and deploying SEAT teams to assess burn areas and assist with recovery efforts by addressing, in an environmentally sensitive manner, flooding, erosion and debris flow that were a direct result of the declared fires. All three of the Southern California Fires were evaluated by SEAT and the findings were included as part of the 2008 fires report.

The following is a summary of fire statistics associated with the 2008 Southern California Fires:

|                       |   |
|-----------------------|---|
| Dates of Operations:  | <u>Response:</u> November 13 through November 28, 2008  |
| Total Fire Incidents: | Three large fires in four counties  |
| Counties Involved:    | Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and Santa Barbara Counties  |
| Total Acres Burned:   | 43,507 acres (Tea Fire - 1,940 acres; Sayre Fire - 11,262 acres; and Freeway Complex Fire - 30,305 acres) |
| Human Fatalities:     | 0   |
| Human Injuries:       | 28  |

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|                                   |   |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Structures Destroyed:             | 1,040 (Tea Fire - 219; Sayre Fire - 634; and Freeway Complex Fire - 314)  |
| Structures Damaged:               | 166 (Tea Fire - 9; Sayre Fire - 30; Freeway Complex Fire - 127)   |
| Residences Destroyed:             | 874 (Tea Fire - 210; Sayre Fire - 477; Freeway Complex Fire - 187)  |
| Residences Damaged:               | 159 (Tea Fire - 9; Sayre Fire - 23; Freeway Complex Fire - 127)   |
| Number Persons Sheltered:         | Orange County sheltered about 300 residents; Santa Barbara County sheltered 210 and another 800 students sheltered in place at the local college.   |
| Number Shelters:                  | Orange County - four sites; Los Angeles County - four sites; Santa Barbara County - two sites   |
| Total County Evacuations Ordered: | Freeway Complex Fire - Orange County evacuated 9,000 homes and approximately 24,000 residents; San Bernardino County's AAR reported that a total of 40,000 residents were evacuated by all four impacted counties; Sayre Fire - Los Angeles County evacuated approximately 10,000 residents from 7,500 threatened homes; Tea Fire - evacuated 5,446 under a mandatory evacuation order and advised 4,500 to evacuate voluntarily. |

### **Proclamations and Declarations**

Local Proclamation: Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, and Santa Barbara counties. City of Anaheim, City of Brea, City of Chino Hills, City of Corona, City of Santa Barbara, and City of Yorba Linda.

Governor's Proclamation: Proclaimed a State of Emergency on November 14, 2008 for Santa Barbara County; on November 15, 2008 for Los Angeles, Orange, and Riverside Counties ; and on November 17, 2008 for San Bernardino County.

Presidential Declaration: On November 18, 2008, the President declared a Major Disaster, FEMA-DR-1810, in the counties of Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and Santa Barbara. San Bernardino County was not included as part of the disaster declaration, but received FMAG funds to assist with firefighting response costs associated with the Freeway Complex Fire.

### **Summary of Successes**

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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, and state/federal partnership.

- State and local agencies throughout California responded in a very timely and efficient manner.
- Unified command and strong coordination between fire and law enforcement were key to evacuating large numbers of residents and animals at threat of the rapidly burning fires, especially during the Freeway Complex Fire.
- 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 California National Guard (CNG) proactively mobilized and positioned aircraft and personnel to provide aerial firefighting operations if needed. CNG's Joint Force Headquarters and Joint Operations Center (JOC) were already activated for their Vigilant Guardian 09 Exercise reducing the requirement for typical activated personnel directly associated with these fires.
- The SEAT Program has consistently demonstrated its value and benefit to the State and impacted local government and is recognized by our federal counterparts. Deployment to assess these fires was exceptionally fast because the SEAT SOS Group was still activated for assessing the 2008 Mid-Year California Fires.
- 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.
- Based on previous response experiences, i.e., serving the public in the LACs, Franchise Tax Board (FTB) was able to develop "go-kits" that were prepared in advance with the appropriate supplies for immediate use by deployed personnel. This dramatically reduced the lead time needed for response and increased customer service at the LACs.
- OCFA became the central ordering point for the Freeway Complex Fire to ensure all resource orders for personnel, supplies, and equipment were properly placed and tracked. As the need grew, resource orders were entered into the Regional Ordering Support System (ROSS) to allow access to firefighting and support resources from multiple regions within Southern California.
- A recent change in the resource ordering rules, which was a result of lessons learned during the 2007 fire siege, allowed for five engine strike teams (25 engines plus firefighting personnel) to be requested directly from neighboring mutual aid regions. As a result, the 25

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engines from CAL FIRE that were located in Riverside County were able to respond immediately without processing delays. At the onset of the Freeway Complex Fire, immediate resource requests were placed for Type I and Type 3 strike teams beyond what could be provided by the OCFA and local agencies. In total, 35 strike teams (175 engines) of various types were ordered within the first four hours of the incident. By noon, six strike teams (30 engines) had arrived from Riverside County. By 1:30 pm, a total of 19 strike teams (95 engines) and 1 task force (6 engines) were operating on the fire. This was in addition to the 58 engines, 3 trucks, 8 patrols, and 5 water tenders that responded as single increments to the Freeway and Landfill Fires.

- Simulation training conducted on October 27, 2008, for a WUI fire in the mutual threat zone along the 91 Freeway provided Freeway Complex Fire Incident Commanders some possible trigger points of when and where to call for evacuation. During the fire, the same trigger points were utilized to make evacuation decisions. When the potential existed for the fire to escape planned control boundaries, evacuations were ordered. The manner and timeliness in which residents were notified was reviewed. After the 2007 Santiago Fire, the County of Orange led in the development and implementation of a public notification system. The AlertOC notification program has been adopted and implemented in many cities throughout the county. Following the Freeway Complex Fire, the City of Yorba Linda began implementing this program.
- The OCFA used an Occupant Liaison Program to keep homeowners informed; to assist them in retrieving items such as medication, money, or clothing that was left behind while evacuating; and to provide emotional support. When appropriate, Occupant Liaison Teams may escort residents to their property. These efforts are aimed at preventing homeowners from independently returning to their property and into a potentially dangerous situation. Even after the mandatory evacuations were lifted, law enforcement officers were directed to only allow verified residents or those who had legitimate business, such as insurance adjusters, cleanup crews, etc., into the impacted neighborhoods.

### **Summary of Areas Needing Improvements**

In general, the management of this disaster went very well and the three fires were put out in a relatively short time considering the difficulty of responding to fast moving fires that were being fueled by the Santa Ana winds and the prolonged drought that made the fuel exceptionally flammable. 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 funding for emergency response operations; enhanced data and information management tools; and improved Regional Emergency Operations Center (REOC) facility conditions. Due to the short duration of the disaster, the need for additional trained staff for surge capacity was not a central problem during this disaster. The following are examples of some of the issues that need to be resolved to improve future disaster response.

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- Some state agencies reported that FEMA’s requirements for a state or local agency to meet “applicant” eligibility criteria on behalf of a private entity were not clear.
- Many state and local agencies do not have the funding to carry out recovery operations on private property. This includes the appropriate clean-up of ash and other debris, including hazardous materials.
- There were no consistent minimum public health and environmental standards for structural debris removal and clean-up regardless of whether it is conducted by private parties, or through coordinated debris removal programs that are conducted by public agencies.
- Communication capabilities at the LACs and Emergency Operations Centers (EOCs) need to be accessible for all types of cellular reception. One state agency had access to their accounting system while working in the LAC while others could not access their agency systems, including lack of email access.
- During the Freeway Complex Fire response, not all firefighting agencies had VHF high bank capability as required by FIRESCOPE. Many agencies continued to use their own radio systems or failed to follow the established communications plan. This further exacerbated the fire-ground communication problem. In addition, the terrain in the fire area was extremely broken and mountainous which hampered radio transmission.
- Current data management tools, especially the Response Information Management System (RIMS), are inadequate to meet the demands of today’s emergency management needs. In addition, Los Angeles County’s Emergency Management Information System had technical problems and their Incident and Event information could not be uploaded to share the information with management.
- Cal EMA’s Daily Costing Report needs to be refined to include more instructions and to establish consistent time frames to ensure that procedures are in place for multiple personnel sent to various locations.
- The conflict between state (SEMS) and national (NIMS) definitions for evacuation terminology continues to cause confusion for the media and the public (mandatory versus order or warning).
- Several state and local agencies still have a need for additional SEMS/RIMS training, including on-line courses for agencies without the resources to send personnel to training.
- There was a lack of knowledge or coordination between emergency managers and volunteer programs and identifying resources that were available to assist during emergencies.
- Several state agencies indicated there is a need for protocols or procedures that address their function within the State Operations Center (SOC), REOC, or LAC. Many agencies have staff deployed who are familiar with the particular function they perform, but formal

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procedures would assist staff who are less familiar with the function and would also standardize the function.

- Due to severe funding limitations, local agencies were unable to agree to become the “applicant” on behalf of the Oak Ridge Mobile Home Park in order to obtain FEMA funding for recovery operations. This led to a delay in recovery operations because of state and local funding issues, including coordinating with the California Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD).
- There is a lack of dedicated funding for SEAT activations and field responses associated with SEAT assessments.
- During the Freeway Complex Fire, off duty firefighters self-activated and commandeered reserve engines unbeknownst to the Unified Command. Personnel on these engines inserted themselves into the firefight without checking in with fire ground commanders or notifying them where they were operating. Some units also lacked proper communications equipment. These actions created serious personnel safety and fire ground accountability concerns.

**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:

- Emergency management training, including SEMS/NIMS/Incident Command System (ICS), at all levels of state and local government needs to be enhanced.
- The SEAT Program needs to be continued on a year round basis and permanent funding for SEAT activations needs to be established.
- Cal EMA needs to ensure that the terminology used with regard to public evacuation is commonly understood and is in conformance with SEMS/NIMS and/or FIREScope to minimize confusion between public agencies.
- Increase CAL FIRE Command Net radio coverage by adding additional radio repeaters as needed in local jurisdictions subject to wildland urban interface fires.
- The state should ensure that evacuation and sheltering of both pets and large animals are included in local and state planning guidance. This should include providing for the co-location of pets and their owners at local shelters.

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- Continue to equip local agencies with VHF radio capability as required by FIRESCOPE.
- Cal EMA needs to work with local government when locations for LACs are being identified to ensure that communication capabilities meet the needs of state agencies that will be staffing the LACs.
- State agencies need to establish formal protocols and/or procedures for each function in the SOC/REOC/EOC or LAC to ensure personnel assigned to that function know how to perform that function.
- Cal EMA needs to provide state agencies with detailed instructions and time frames for completing the Daily Costing Report to ensure the reports are completed on a standardized basis.
- Before a mission task is filled, the REOC and SOC Operations needs to ensure that the OA has exhausted its resources before requesting assistance from outside sources.
- Develop training specifically for Volunteer Center personnel to increase their knowledge of how to coordinate with local government and the local American Red Cross, as well as setting up an Emergency Volunteer Center, correctly registering and deploying registered volunteers.

**ORGANIZATIONS CONTRIBUTING TO THIS REPORT**

State Agencies and Departments

California Conservation Corps  
California Department of Conservation  
California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation  
California Department of Fish and Game  
California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE)  
California Department of Parks and Recreation (State Parks)  
California Department of Social Services  
California Department of Transportation  
California Emergency Management Agency  
California Environmental Protection Agency  
California Geological Survey  
California Highway Patrol  
California Integrated Waste Management Board  
California National Guard  
California Natural Resources Agency  
California Volunteers  
Department of Motor Vehicles  
Department of Toxic Substances Control  
Department of Water Resources  
Emergency Medical Services Authority  
Employment Development Department  
Franchise Tax Board  
Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment  
Regional Water Quality Control Board

Local Government/Operational Areas (OAs)

Los Angeles County  
Orange County  
Riverside County  
San Bernardino County  
City of Yorba Linda