

CALIFORNIA EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY

2009 LOS ANGELES COUNTY WILDFIRES 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) 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 2009 Los Angeles County Wildfires was September 25, 2009. 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.

This AAR describes and reviews the response and recovery actions taken by state and local agencies to manage and ultimately extinguish the 2009 Los Angeles County Wildfires. This AAR addresses three fires that ignited almost simultaneously in Los Angeles County beginning on August 25, 2009 until the last fire was finally contained on October 16, 2009. These fires included the Station Fire, the Morris Fire, and the Rancho Palos Verdes (PV) Fire. The Station Fire became the largest and most destructive fire to ever occur in Los Angeles County recorded history. Unfortunately, the Station Fire was also a deadly fire that led to the death of two firefighters who were killed when their fire vehicle went off the road as a result of the reduced visibility caused by heavy smoke.

It should be noted that like most of Southern California, Los Angeles County has a history of disastrous fires. Since 1980, Los Angeles County's canyon areas have been adversely impacted by eleven fires serious enough to warrant a proclamation of emergency. Most of these fires occurred during the normal Southern California fire season which begins in October with the arrival of the Santa Ana winds which accelerate the impact of the fire. However, several of these fires, including the 2009 Los Angeles County Wildfires, occurred in July or August as a result of drought conditions, high temperatures, and heavy undergrowth in the steep fire prone slopes of Southern California's canyons. In this case, temperatures exceeding 100 degrees for much of late August 2009, in combination with low humidity and a large quantity of tinder-dry fuel, caused by three years of drought, amplified the effect of some of the fires. On August 26, 2009, the Station Fire exploded out of control despite the lack of winds to spread the flames. The drought conditions, along with extreme terrain in many of the undeveloped areas, impeded firefighters' access to the burn areas making firefighting difficult.

The overall evaluation of the State's response to the 2009 Los Angeles County Wildfires was generally positive from both the public's point of view and the responding governmental, private, and federal entities that were involved in this disaster. Due to California's strong and

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established SEMS structure that includes the use of the Fire Mutual Aid System in conjunction with the robust and well-organized local government operations, this emergency was responded to successfully. In addition, lessons learned from the previous fire sieges in 2003, 2007, and 2008 has 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.

Description of Event

The 2009 Los Angeles County Wildfires consisted of three separate fires located within Los Angeles County. On August 25, 2009, the first of these wildland fires, the Morris Fire, was ignited about five miles north of Azusa off Highway 39. By the time this fire was contained on September 3, 2009, 2,168 acres had burned, but due to firefighters' quick action, it resulted in no loss of lives, homes or other buildings.

The following day, August 26, 2009, the Station Fire started in the forested wildland below the Angeles Crest Highway area about four miles north of La Canada. The Station Fire was located in extremely rugged and steep terrain making it difficult to contain. As a result, the Station Fire burned 160,577 acres and destroyed 89 homes and 26 businesses before it was fully contained on October 16, 2009. In addition, two firefighters lost their lives while assisting with firefighting efforts.

On August 27, 2009, the Rancho Palos Verdes (PV) Fire ignited in the rolling hills near Rancho Palos Verdes. The PV Fire burned 230 acres and damaged three homes before it was contained. However, due to the fact that the Governor declared an emergency for the entire County of Los Angeles effective August 26th, the PV Fire was included as part of the 2009 Los Angeles County Wildfires. In addition, the Morris Fire was also included in this AAR because many of the same agencies were involved in the Los Angeles County firefighting efforts associated with all three of these fires and it would be difficult to exclude activities associated with the Morris Fire.

On August 28, 2009, Governor Schwarzenegger proclaimed a State of Emergency based on the magnitude of these fires which indicated they were likely to exceed the control of services, personnel, equipment and facilities of any single county, city and county, or city and thus require firefighting assistance from the combined forces of the mutual aid region or regions.

Local Assistance Centers (LACs) began opening on September 17, 2009 to assist victims of the Los Angeles County Wildfires. Cal EMA in conjunction with Los Angeles County opened a LAC in the small community of Acton and another in Sylmar for one day to serve the survivors of these fires. These LACs provided centrally located services for a range of services that were provided by approximately 23 state, federal and local agencies. These services were aimed at assisting individuals with obtaining the necessary information they needed to begin recovering from this disaster. These services included the replacement of vital documents, including drivers' licenses and car registration. In addition, the Small Business Administration (SBA) opened a Disaster Loan Outreach Center in La Crescenta on September 25, 2009 to provide additional assistance.

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Response Phase:	Response August 25, 2009 through October 16, 2009
Total Fire Incidents:	Three fires (Station, Morris, and Rancho Palos Verdes Fires)
Counties Involved:	Los Angeles County
Total Acres Burned:	Station Fire: 160,577 acres; Morris Fire: 2,168 acres; and Rancho Palos Verdes Fire: 230 acres
Human Fatalities:	Station Fire: 2 (firefighters)
Human Injuries:	29 total; Station Fire: 23; Morris Fire: 6
Structures Destroyed:	211 total: Station Fire; 209 (89 residences, 26 commercial properties, and 94 outbuildings); PV Fire: 2 outbuildings; Morris Fire: 0
Structures Damaged:	60 total; Station Fire; 57 (13 residences, 22 commercial properties, and 22 outbuildings); PV Fire: 3 residences; Morris Fire: 0
Residences Destroyed:	Total: 89; Station Fire: 89
Residences Damaged:	18 total; Station Fire: 13; PV Fire: 5
Number Persons Sheltered:	Numbers are not available.
Number Shelters:	8 Shelters: Station Fire: Tujunga, La Canada Flintridge, Santa Clarita, 2 in Palmdale, La Crescenta, Altadena; PV Fire: Rolling Hills Estates; Station
Total County Evacuations Ordered:	Station Fire: Mandatory: 6,600 homes (10,000 residents) and 12,000 homes were threatened

Proclamations and Declarations

Local Proclamation: Los Angeles County

Governor's Proclamation: Issued a declaration of emergency on August 28, 2009 for Los Angeles County

Presidential Declaration: None, but the Station Fire (FM-2830) and Morris Fire (FM-2828) qualified for Fire Management Assistance Grant (FMAG) funding.

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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, and state/federal partnership.

- State and local agencies throughout California responded in a very timely and efficient manner.
- 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.
- Implementation of the unified command structure resulted in successful and efficient operations.
- Unified command and strong coordination between fire and law enforcement were key to evacuating large numbers of residents and animals threatened by the rapidly burning fires, especially during the Station Fire.
- The FMAG process worked effectively to ensure local government had the firefighting resources needed to control the spread of the fire and prevent the fire from becoming a major disaster. The FMAG declaration provides federal financial assistance on an expedited basis to fund firefighting efforts, mitigation, and management activities.
- 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) developed “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.

Summary of Areas Needing Improvements

In general, the management of this disaster went very well with two of the three fires (Morris and PV Fires) were extinguished in a short time. The Station Fire proved to be more difficult to contain because of the steep and rugged terrain containing highly volatile vegetation conditions as a result of prolonged drought conditions. In addition, the United States Forest Service (USFS) had recently reduced the firefighting personnel in the Angeles National Forest where the fire initially ignited which made early containment of the Station Fire more difficult.

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As in any disaster, improvements can be made to bolster California's future response to disasters. The following information is based on input from various state and local agencies and is intended to address problems that were reported by staff that participated in the State Operations Center (SOC), Regional Emergency Operations Center (REOC), or provided field support to the Operational Area (OA). Improvements are recommended in the following areas:

- There is no clear understanding of the requirements that must be met by State and/or local government agencies for establishing a cleanup level for asbestos.
- Joint commands between the USFS and the Los Angeles County Fire Department were only established when the spreading Station Fire became an imminent danger to foothill communities. This allowed the Station Fire to grow so quickly that firefighters could not gain control of the spreading fire early in the response.
- Local agencies were slow in requesting assistance for initiating fire recovery operations effectively.
- 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.
- Several state and local agencies still have a need for additional SEMS/RIMS training for position specific roles and responsibilities, as it relates to the SOC, REOC, and the Emergency Operations Center (EOC). This training should include on-line courses for agencies without the resources to send personnel to training.

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), and RIMS, at all levels of state and local government needs to be enhanced and provided on a regular basis.

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- Cal EMA communication technology systems and software need to allow staff from other Departments and Agencies to connect to email, RIMS, and the Internet. Suggest using Web EOC or some similar operating system to replace RIMS.
- Los Angeles County and the USFS have determined that they need to be more aggressive in fighting forest fires by joining together early in their response to extinguish any fire in the southern portion of the Angeles National Forest so that future fires do not become as massive and dangerous as the Station Fire.
- Cal EMA needs to provide guidance and/or procedures to state and local agencies regarding mission tasking criteria. Including when it is not necessary to obtain a mission task.
- Current policy on conducting ash/debris and hazardous materials recovery operations on residential property must be distributed to State and local agencies. The Department of Toxic Substances Control (DTSC) needs to prepare guidance for local agencies that address conducting emergency recovery operations involving residential properties

ORGANIZATIONS CONTRIBUTING TO THIS REPORT

State Agencies and Departments

California Conservation Corps
California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection
California Department of Health Care Services
California Department of Insurance
California Department of Motor Vehicles
California Department of Public Health
California Department of Social Services
California Department of Transportation
California Emergency Management Agency
California Environmental Protection Agency
California Highway Patrol
California National Guard
California Volunteers
Department of Motor Vehicles
Department of Toxic Substances Control
Emergency Medical Services Authority
Employment Development Department
Franchise Tax Board
State Board of Equalization

Local Government/Operational Areas (OAs)

Los Angeles County