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THE EVOLUTION OF THE NATIONAL INCIDENT MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

The events of 9/11 spurred much change throughout the public safety industry in the United States. One major change involved the creation of a national incident management system (NIMS). Its implementation officially began when President George W. Bush issued Homeland Security Presidential Directive #5, which directed the emergency response community to "enhance the ability of the United States to manage domestic incidents by establishing a single, comprehensive national incident management system."

Although the reality of a national system that could help guide and organize resources involved in a large-scale event was new to Homeland Security at the time of 9/11, the concept has been well established in the state of California since the 1970s, where the roots of NIMS are firmly planted in firefighting history in the form of FIRESCOPE.

BORN OF WILDFIRE, EVOLVED FOR ALL HAZARDS

In 1970, a rash of major wildfires occurred up and down the State of California. In 13 days of fire, 16 lives were lost, 700 structures were destroyed and 500,000 acres were burned. Much of this occurred within the jurisdictions of the Los Angeles City (LAFD) and Los Angeles County (LACoFD) fire departments.

Post-incident critiques indicated that while both departments cooperated with each other, their joint effectiveness did not meet the expectations of either agency. To develop means to improve resource coordination when facing large-scale incidents, the chiefs of both departments applied for and received a grant.

Shortly thereafter, responding to the same set of catastrophic fires throughout the state, Congress tasked the U.S Forest Service (USFS) with a similar goal of improving resource coordination, but aimed specifically at wildland fires. The LAFD and LACoFD chiefs, along with the USFS administrators, quickly realized that by combining the efforts of the two projects, they could accomplish more than they would if they functioned independently. The joint project was titled **FI**re **RE**sources of **S**outhern **C**alifornia **O**rganized for **P**otential **E**mergency, or FIRESCOPE.

EARLY ORGANIZATION

High-ranking administrative/command-level officers representing federal, state and local fire protection agencies in Southern California made up FIRESCOPE's policy board. These officials were of such rank that they could make operational policy decisions for their agencies.

Also established was a working task force of experienced

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The value of having a single incident management system in place for emergency responders in differing agencies was demonstrated on Sept. 12, 2008, when a Metrolink commuter train collided head-on with a Southern Pacific freight train, killing 26 people and injuring more than 130. Initial scene management was shared between the LAFD and the Los Angeles Police Dept using NIMS-ICS. The National Transportation Safety Board became part of the unified command structure during the second operational period. Assisting agencies included the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, Southern Pacific Railroad, Metro Rail, the Ventura (Calif.) Fire Department, LACoFD and the Los Angeles County Coroner. A family assistance center was established with help from cooperating agencies, including the Red Cross, the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health and the Crisis Response Team from the Mayor's Office.

field-level command officers, supported by a consulting firm with fire service experience. Specifically, the City of Los Angeles, the County of Los Angeles, the County of Ventura, the California Department of Forestry and Fire Prevention (now CAL FIRE), the California Office of Emergency Services (now California Emergency Management Agency-Cal EMA) and the United States Forest Service (USFS) all provided a battalion chief or an officer of equivalent rank on a near full-time basis to staff the task force. This group was charged with addressing the issues of incident-level operational coordination. The broad, varied experiences of these officers ensured that their recommendations for improving incident-level, multi-agency operations would be formed from the perspective of those who had extensive experience within functional field operations.

BROADENING THE SCOPE

Although the original task force's early investigation into multi-agency operations focused on equipment (e.g., radio and hose coupling compatibility), and department emergency operations policies (wildland fire control vs. protection of structures), it soon became obvious to the task force and policy board members that the primary issues actually revolved around the diverse missions of the involved agencies and the divergent nomenclature and organizational structures used by the agencies for command of emergency incidents. In other words, it became clear that efforts toward multi-agency operations coordination wouldn't be effective unless the project's purpose was broadened to encompass all hazards that their departments faced, as well as the missions they were assigned. It was further determined that to function in an all-hazards environment, the command system had to be simple and easily scalable, from a single resource to large, multi-agency operations.

After a period of "spirited debate" with the federal funding officials, the decision was made to formally enlarge the FIRESCOPE effort to include all hazards challenging both wildland and urban fire agencies.

Note: At this point in the evolution of FIRESCOPE, only fire service (including EMS) issues were being considered, as there was no law enforcement representation on either the policy board or the task force.

MAKING IT OFFICIAL

Each of the participating agencies used their own approach to applying the FIRESCOPE Incident Command System (ICS) as their emergency command methodology. For example, in the mid-1970s, the LAFD focused initial implementation on high-rise operations. This was felt necessary because over several years, different senior officers had developed their own unique approaches to managing complex high-rise-related command challenges, which caused confusion

at some larger incidents.

There was some resistance to the command system change, but using experience gained through "prototype exercises," a committee of LAFD battalion chiefs assigned to high-rise areas of the city developed detailed lesson plans and instructional aides that were presented to every chief officer during table-top exercises. Subsequently, several large-scale field exercises were held, introducing ICS to nearly every member of the LAFD.

After reviewing this training effort and relevant critiques from the participants, LAFD department administration decreed ICS as *the official and only* management system to be used for the direction of all incident operations, as well as major non-emergency (training, public demonstrations, etc.) events. It was also added to all promotional examinations.

Although not an immediately smooth transition, this total commitment to ICS by the LAFD administration resulted in ICS becoming part of the LAFD culture, which is a major feat considering the size of the department, its large response area and its varied missions.

The LAFD faces a broad range of emergency incident challenges (e.g., large-scale industrial, commercial and residential properties; major harbor and airport facilities; large wildland/urban interface areas; hazmat storage and utilization; and emergency advanced life support ambulance service). With some relatively minor modification, the LAFD has used ICS for more than 37 years for managing every type of emergency situation, from single-family residence fires to large-scale multi-agency incidents.

Some agencies have indicated that they plan to switch to NIMS-ICS when an incident/disaster escalates to the point that federal or state agency involvement is necessary; however, switching from one management system to another during the course of an incident is a design for chaos.

UPDATING FIRESCOPE

Soon after ICS implementation by Los Angeles City, Los Angles County and Ventura County agencies, fire organizations throughout California adopted ICS and became part of the FIRESCOPE organization. The title of FIRESCOPE was amended to "**FI**refighting **RES**ources of **C**alifornia **O**rganized for **P**otential **E**mergency" to reflect the statewide use of the system.

The FIRESCOPE task force, which is still in place today, reports to the FIRESCOPE operations team, which in turn reports to the FIRESCOPE board. These

bodies meet several times annually to continue development of improved interagency operations.

Today, the vast majority of fire agencies in California, as well as many other public agencies (law enforcement, public works, etc.), use ICS for all types of emergency (and many non-emergency) incidents.

THE NATIONAL INCIDENT MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

After 9/11, President George W. Bush issued Homeland Security Presidential Directive #5: Management of Domestic Incidents. The release of this document established a single national emergency management system, the National Incident Management System (NIMS), which included FIRESCOPE ICS, as well other aspects of the FIRESCOPE program. The full implementation of NIMS allows all levels of government throughout the nation to work efficiently and effectively together.

MODIFICATIONS & REVISIONS

Although heavily weighted with FIRESCOPE material, when NIMS was first released, the FIRESCOPE policy board directed its task force to review and make necessary changes to the Field Operations Guide (FOG) and other FIRESCOPE documents to ensure compliance with NIMS.

The NFPA also made revisions to some of its standards. The technical committee for NFPA 1561: Standard on Emergency Services Incident Management System, requested and received public comments and received approval of the Association's membership to revise the standard so that it was compliant with NIMS.

The federal government reviewed NFPA 1561 and NFPA 1600: Standard on Disaster/Emergency Management and Business Continuity Programs, both developed through a consensus and public comment process. The National Integration Center (NIC) then issued a NIMS Alert on Jan. 4, 2007, that recommended voluntary adoption of these two standards, stating "Elective adoption of NFPA 1600 and 1561 would provide jurisdictions a set of guidelines that if followed would assist in becoming NIMS-compliant."

Revisions were also made to the National Incident Management Consortium's Model Procedure Guides and to documents developed by the National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG).

NATIONAL IMPLEMENTATION ISSUES

Not all agencies have complied with NIMS or use NIMS ICS during emergency incidents. Some of these agencies have indicated that they plan to switch to NIMS ICS when an incident/disaster escalates to the point that federal or state agency involvement is necessary; however, switching from one management system to another during the course of an incident is a design for chaos. Consider multi-agency response situations:

- A tornado, earthquake, aircraft crash, etc.: Numerous agencies respond, representing different geographical and legal jurisdictions (e.g., local fire, mutual-aid fire, law enforcement, third-party EMS), and using different management systems. How many times will the management methodology need to be changed? Who will be in charge? How will incident command be transferred? Can a unified command process be effectively initiated?
- An anthrax incident: Local law enforcement will arrive and implement its local, non-compliant incident control process, as will the local fire service and local, third-party EMS. Finally, the FBI arrives, assuming NIMS-ICS organization will ▶

The Question of FEMA Involvement

Since September 11, 2001, FEMA has been charged with many responsibilities in preparing the country for another large-scale incident. To this end, FEMA initially formed nine working groups to develop guidance documents for emergency responders. They have now expanded to 12 working groups:

1. Animal Emergency Response
2. Aviation Management
3. Emergency Management (EOC)
4. Emergency Medical Services
5. Fire and Hazmat
6. ICS Core Competencies and Qualifications Management
7. Incident Management
8. Law Enforcement
9. Mass-Casualty Care
10. Medical and Public Health
11. Public Works
12. Search and Rescue

FEMA has produced three sets of documents: NIMS; the National Response Framework, or the NRF (originally the National Response Plan); and various ICS forms. The Incident Management Working Group has produced nine guides in addition to approved ICS forms:

1. Incident Complexity Guide
2. All-Hazard Position task books
3. Area Command Guide
4. Field Operations Guide
5. ICS forms for emergency responders
6. Incident Management Personnel Qualification Guide
7. Type 3 Incident Management Guide
8. Emergency Management Guide for EOCs
9. Multi-Agency Coordination Guide

These guides and forms have been developed with input by stakeholders, and some have been sent out for public comments; however, 10 years after 9/11, *only the ICS forms have been finalized and released by FEMA.*

So the question remains: Ten years after 9/11, why hasn't FEMA taken the necessary steps to have all of these documents available for local agencies? Releasing guidance documents for agencies to follow when developing local response plans should be a high priority for the organization tasked with the nation's preparation for terrorism.

be utilized. The same questions that were asked in the previous bullet point can be asked here, because the same problems will arise.

- Federal Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) operation: An explosion occurs with numerous injuries. Local fire and third-party EMS authority are requested on scene. The DEA uses NIMS-ICS, but the fire agency and EMS authority use their own specific emergency scene control systems. Again, can the command function be effectively carried out with the different on-scene agencies using their own command system?
- A multi-casualty school bus accident: Several agencies respond with varying legal and geographical jurisdiction. Later, a victim initiates legal charges that the incident was poorly managed. Expert witnesses testify that avoidable fatalities occurred. An investigation reveals each responding agency operated under its own specific emergency scene management system. How will this be considered by a judge/jury? How will media handle the story? How will the responding agencies' reputations be affected?

Note: Although federal regulation requires the use of NIMS ICS to receive federal grants and funding, there are no federal NIMS "police" to enforce the use of the system. Rather, it appears that the federal government is relying on the individual states to ensure NIMS compliance from agencies that receive federal grants.

CONCLUSION

The concepts of FIRESCOPE and ICS have come a long way since the 1970s. Much progress has been made to successfully organize and unify command resources during major incidents.

The issuance of NIMS ICS through Presidential Directive #5 was a very significant step at the federal level to give clear direction to all federal, state and local agencies (as well as the private sector) in the event of a large-scale emergency. But without local compliance, its effectiveness will be limited. Only the consistent exercise of ICS can produce desired results when confronted with large multi-agency incidents.

Chief William M. Neville served 24 years with the Los Angeles City Fire Department before retiring from the chief of staff position in 1981 to serve as chief of the Hayward (Calif.) Fire Department. He has also served as the superintendent of the National Fire Academy (part of FEMA) and as assistant vice-president for Fire Service Affairs at the NFPA. He was assigned to the FIRESCOPE program in 1972 and was directly involved with its development through 1974. Neville holds a bachelor's degree in political science, as well as an associate's degree in fire science.

Chief Robert Neamy (ret.) served for 33 years with the Los Angeles City Fire Department, retiring as deputy chief of operations. He has represented the LAFD on the NFPA 1500 Standard Committee for 15 years and on the FIRESCOPE Ops team for 20 years. He also served six years in the U.S. Coast Guard Reserve, promoting to the rank of First Class Petty Officer. Currently, Neamy is the vice-president of the NIMS Consortium and is a member and past chair of FEMA's Incident Management Working Group. He is also a current member of FEMA's Search and Rescue Group, as well as a member of the Douglas County Sheriff's Department Advisory Council. Neamy holds associate's degrees in both fire science and lithography.