



Chief Pilot Bill Quistorf
Co-Chair
Northwest Regional Aviation
425-754-5489

William.quistorf@snoco.org

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INNOVATIVE PRACTICE

Northwest Regional Aviation: Protecting the Puget Sound

SUMMARY

The Seattle Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI) established Northwest Regional Aviation (NWRA)—an aviation consortium that protects the Puget Sound area from terrorism and responds to large-scale disasters. The NWRA saved 12 survivors during the first three hours of the Snohomish County mudslide on March 22, 2014.

DESCRIPTION

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, DC, the Seattle UASI sought to increase capabilities of existing aviation units to interdict threats to high-risk targets. The UASI's five jurisdictions pooled resources to create NWRA in 2004. The UASI invested in new and upgraded aircraft, purchased high-tech equipment, and standardized training and exercise requirements for teams from each jurisdiction. The unit performs search and rescue operations, assists with criminal manhunts, and enhances port security in the region. NWRA is capable of operating in the geographically challenging environments of western Washington, which include some of the Nation's tallest mountains and two of the Nation's busiest ports.

The Seattle UASI faced two major challenges when developing NWRA. First, aircraft specialized equipment needed to be standardized. The five UASI jurisdictions addressed this by convening regular planning meetings to standardize purchase of avionics and other high-tech equipment. Second, participating jurisdictions had differing methods for training and exercising aerial response teams. NWRA standardized training and exercises across jurisdictions to improve uniformity and predictability during incident response. By developing common procedures for performing high-rise rescue, vessel boarding, and other critical operations, NWRA ensured the interoperability of its teams for coordinated multi-aircraft missions. Additionally, the unit routinely exercises with the United States Navy, Customs and Border Patrol (CBP), the United States Coast Guard, Washington State Patrol, Washington National Guard and the Washington Ferry System to enhance the region's law enforcement and counterterrorism capacity.



Figure 1: NWRA rescued 16 survivors from the Snohomish County mudslide in March 2014.

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NWRA has proven capable of operating in Washington's challenging geographic environments. On March 22, 2014, a massive mudslide struck Snohomish County, northeast of Seattle. In areas of thick, unstable mud up to 75 feet deep, NWRA was able to spot and rescue 12 survivors in the first 3 hours of response operations. Regular aviation drills allowed six aircraft from the NWRA to operate simultaneously in constricted airspace along with a U.S. Navy helicopter during the response. In response to the 2013 I-5 Bridge collapse, NWRA coordinated the aviation response along with the search

and rescue operations. NWRA teams have routinely rescued injured hikers from the Cascade Mountains, responded to vessel distress calls in the Puget Sound, and assisted Seattle police in criminal manhunts following active shooter incidents. The Seattle UASI's dedication to investment in aircraft, technology, training, and exercising has resulted in a unique regional asset capable of responding to a variety of threats and hazards.



Figure 2: The NWRA regularly participates in regional exercises, such as this fast roping exercise with King County Sheriff and CBP in the Port of Seattle.

INVESTMENT INFORMATION

Since 2007, the Seattle UASI has allocated more than \$8 million in Federal preparedness grant funding—including funds from the State Homeland Security Grant Program, the UASI grant program, and the Port Security Grant Program—to NWRA. The state has used Federal grants to purchase and upgrade aircraft, acquire high-tech aircraft equipment (thermal imaging devices, video downlink equipment, moving maps, and rescue hoists, among many investments), and develop specialized training practices for aviation crews.

REFERENCES

Example of Joint Training with Federal, State and Local Partners:

<http://wasnohomishcounty.civicplus.com/Archive.aspx?ADID=3884>

Initial Development of the Aviation Unit:

http://seattletimes.com/html/localnews/2002356419_helicopter03m.html

Northwest Regional Aviation Unit's Response to the Snohomish County Mudslide:

<https://www.alea.org/public/pressReleases/ViewPressRelease.aspx?i=2053>

Video of Rescue During Snohomish Mudslide:

<http://tonythomasblog.wordpress.com/2014/03/26/dramatic-helicopter-rescue-video-from-the-oso-wa-landslide/>