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PRACTICE NOTE

Mass Evacuation: Georgia Emergency Management Agency's Evacuation and Reentry Branch

PRACTICE

The Georgia Emergency Management Agency (GEMA) has established a field-based Evacuation and Reentry Branch (ERB) of the State Operations Center (SOC) to coordinate coastal evacuation and reentry operations. The ERB allows representatives from key state and private sector entities to focus solely on evacuation issues, to more easily coordinate with evacuating communities, and to maintain better situational awareness of field conditions.

DESCRIPTION

In September 1999, the approach of Hurricane Floyd caused one of the largest mass evacuations in history, involving vulnerable citizens in all of Georgia's coastal counties as well as over one million Floridians. During this time, evacuation and reentry operations were coordinated entirely out of the SOC in Atlanta, which is located in northern Georgia. Based upon the important work conducted by GEMA field personnel during the Hurricane Floyd evacuation, GEMA determined that a field-based forward operations center would improve situational awareness and coordination with coastal jurisdictions during evacuation and reentry operations. In 2006, GEMA began planning efforts to establish a branch of the SOC that would coordinate these operations from the Georgia Department of Transportation's (GDOT) maintenance facility in Jesup, which is located near Georgia's coastal counties.

The SOC director will activate the ERB before the start of Georgia's evacuation operations, approximately 72-48 hours prior to the forecast arrival of tropical storm force winds. The SOC director will appoint an ERB director to serve as the official liaison between the SOC, the ERB, and local emergency management. Upon activation, the ERB will also be staffed by representatives from key state agencies and private sector organizations. These representatives will liaise with each other and coordinate response operations with their organizations' emergency operations centers to develop unified recommendations for operational action and to provide effective tactical control. The ERB director will send these recommendations to the SOC for coordination with other operations and final approval.

The represented organizations will include:

- GEMA;
- GDOT;
- Georgia State Patrol
- Georgia Forestry Commission;
- Georgia Department of Natural Resources;
- Georgia Department of Defense;

- Southern Company and Georgia Power Corporation;
- Georgia Transmission Corporation;
- Georgia Electric Membership Corporations; and the
- Amateur Radio Emergency Services.

Although some of these organizations are only involved in the post-storm reentry operations, their representatives will deploy to the ERB upon its activation prior to landfall. Their early arrival will ensure that these representatives will be able to begin coordinating post-storm operations immediately after the storm's impact.

The ERB will provide decision-makers from all relevant agencies with a facility in which they can focus solely on coordinating evacuation and reentry operations. Since the ERB will be located close to the potentially impacted area, the ERB will provide a number of benefits:

- The ERB will facilitate closer coordination with evacuating communities by collaborating closely with GEMA's regional field coordinators, who have built close working relationships with local emergency management agencies. A GEMA field coordinator would also likely be designated as the ERB director.
- ERB representatives are more likely to maintain an appropriate sense of urgency because they will be able to observe the storm's effects first-hand.
- The ERB will have easy access to subject-matter experts for engineering- and transportation-related consults because it is collocated with the GDOT's maintenance branch at Jesup.

GEMA Field Coordinators

GEMA has assigned one field coordinator to each of the eight administrative areas in Georgia. During an emergency or disaster, the field coordinators are responsible for on-scene supervision and the coordination of state and federal assistance actions and programs.

CITATIONS

Georgia Emergency Management Agency. *Evacuation and Re-entry Branch Standard Operating Procedure*. 01 Jan 2007.

Ray, Chuck. Chief of Field Programs, Georgia Emergency Management Agency. Interview with *Lessons Learned Information Sharing*, 28 Feb 2007.

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