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Communications, Preparedness, and Response  
"Assessing the Capabilities and Coordination of Federal Emergency Response Teams"

## **Intro**

Thank you Chairman Cuellar, Ranking Member Charles Dent and members of the Subcommittee on Emergency Communications, Preparedness, and Response for this opportunity to discuss the federal government's capabilities to respond to national emergencies. I would also like to thank Congresswoman Sanchez for her role in pushing forward the issues of the USAR task forces and introducing crucial legislation, HR \_\_\_\_\_.

I'm speaking here on behalf of the Orange County Fire Authority and on behalf of all agencies that sponsor one of the twenty eight National Urban Search and Rescue Task Forces. For several years the 28 sponsoring agencies have been advocating for legislation that will authorize the Task Forces under FEMA, address administrative issues and provide stable funding. It is our hope that we are taking a step forward in realizing these goals today.

I have had the privilege since 1997 of serving as the Fire Chief for Orange County Fire Authority and overseeing the protection of the 1.3 million residents that live in the 22 cities and unincorporated portions of Orange County. In addition to providing basic fire and emergency medical service to our residents and businesses, we also have within Orange County major tourist attractions such as Disneyland, Knott's Berry Farm and Angel Stadium along with the Ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles immediately to our north and the San Onofre Nuclear Power Plant directly to the south. As with almost all of California we also face the threat of a major earthquake. Undoubtedly this has contributed to our belief in maintaining a prepared and well trained cadre of individuals to be a part of the National Urban Search and Rescue System.

## **USAR Background**

Orange County Fire Authority has been a USAR sponsoring agency since 1990. Before being approached by FEMA, we and other major urban areas had begun to prepare for major building collapses and search and rescue operations. Local agencies were well suited to provide personnel with a high level of training that lent itself naturally to the specialized skills needed to serve as a member of a USAR Task Force. I believe most would agree with FEMA wisely choosing not to have an in-house rescue capability of its own to administer and operate on a daily basis for the sake of responding to the occasional national emergency incident. Instead, FEMA recognized that the best sources for urban search and rescue knowledge and skills resided at the State and local levels.

Back then, local agencies were not sure how to approach this new effort and not every local agency saw value in participating in this new federal response capability. Many saw USAR as a potentially costly burden where local agencies would be stuck with administering this new program and not receiving commensurate value. Some of us recognized, though, overall we would be better off with developing the personnel, training, skills and protocols to work together during a large emergency incident. In fact, in California we had just experienced the Loma Prieta earthquake and the collapse of the San Francisco Bay Bridge. We knew the consequences of not being prepared and trained

for large urban emergencies requiring specialized resources from outside the immediate capabilities of local agencies.

This is likely part of why FEMA saw fit to have 8 of the 28 National Task Forces located in California. We had been focused on earthquake preparedness for decades and were well suited to see the value in having our personnel trained and cooperating with, not just each other, but with federal resources to develop a sophisticated response capability.

As a large agency comprised of over 800 safety personnel, we have the resources and ability to make those personnel available for extended deployments responding to large scale national incidents. However, we must still rely on assistance from other agencies such as the Anaheim Fire Department, Santa Ana Fire Department, Orange Fire Department, LA County Sheriffs and Montebello Fire to fully staff USAR Task Force 5. In fact, almost all sponsoring agencies rely upon assistance from other public agencies or other organizations to staff the 210 positions of a USAR Task Force.

As I state above, FEMA wisely recognized that local and state agencies had the expertise and knowledge upon which they could build to develop a national response system. Until this time, the federal government had limited response capabilities. The national guard was available to provide manpower and security during and after incidents but was not trained or equipped to conduct search and rescue in specialized settings, such as a building collapse or massive WMD exposure.

Local and state agencies, however, had experience dealing with hazardous material exposures, earthquake and hurricane related building collapses and mass casualty incidents that require planning and logistics training. To some degree, whether a building collapses due to natural causes or by acts of terrorism, the response is the same. One obvious modification would be the additional use of WMDs in a building collapses but, again, our training for hazardous material spills provides some background in the specialized training needed for those potential incidents.

Locally, the value of the USAR Task Forces isn't that we are given equipment and resources that can be used to supplement local resources. Nothing could be further from the truth. I cannot stress this point enough as it seems to be a recurring misconception by many who have written reports that the task forces and their equipment supplement local response capabilities. The purpose of the USAR Task Forces is to be ready and trained so that they may deploy to incidents across the country within the FEMA mandated six hours after activation. They must be able to sustain themselves for the first 72 hours of operation. None of this would be possible if the sponsoring agencies were using the equipment and materials on a daily basis for their local responses.

Let me speak to the specific arrangement of OCFA's USAR Task Force-5. In our possession are the following pieces of apparatus:

- Two tractors & 53 foot trailers

- 2 Box Trucks
- Suburban and pick-up trucks
- Forklifts
- 2 utility vehicles
- 1 flatbed trailer

These vehicles are packed and ready with specialized equipment purchased with FEMA grant funds or provided directly by FEMA. In Orange County, these assets are stored throughout 5 fire stations, where we oversee the logistics and maintenance of the equipment so that it is ready to deploy at a moment's notice. Again, let me emphasize that the USAR Task Forces act as a "ready reserve" team available immediately to respond at the direction of FEMA. We provide the first surge of personnel and equipment that comes in behind the local first responders to help and expand their capabilities. The vehicles and equipment are not being used by local agencies to respond to local EMS calls, fires or other day to day emergency incidents. The vehicles and equipment caches are being stored safely and securely ready to respond on behalf of FEMA and the federal government.

In fact, we are prohibited by our agreements with FEMA from using the cache equipment unless sanctioned by FEMA such as in a training exercise. Moreover, when some suggest that the Task Forces are supplementing local responsibilities, it is important to remember that a Task Force would not respond to a national emergency in their own backyard. The Task Forces are comprised of first responders from local agencies and those persons would be otherwise occupied and committed to the incident. For example, during the attacks on the World Trade Center, some of the firefighters that comprised NY Task Force-1 were those individuals that were running into the towers during their collapse. Those individuals were engaged in the immediate response and it is the other task forces from throughout the country that were looked on to come in and provide support. Consequently, in case of a large earthquake or other disaster in Southern California, we would rely upon the Northern California Task Forces and other out of state Task Forces to respond and assist us.

This is not to say that local agencies see little value from the resources provided via our participation in the National USAR System. A large part of our job is developing protocols and guidelines for how to handle various emergency scenarios. Quite often, we are working across multiple jurisdictions and with various agencies. Our participation in the National USAR System provides an opportunity to develop a fellowship and cooperative understanding with other agencies. The benefits of this relationship extend to FEMA and other federal agencies. Local agencies feel a greater level of comfort and trust when they realize that they are receiving assistance from fellow local first responders.

Lastly, local agencies receive immense value in providing higher levels of training to their personnel. This training is brought back to the local level and spreads to other local and regional agencies. In fact, there are a number of regional and state teams across the country that have organized themselves and modeled their training and protocols on what FEMA and the 28 Task Forces have adopted.

### **USAR System Needs**

While I can proudly point to our response to the Northridge Earthquake, Atlanta Olympic Games, Oklahoma Bombing, Shuttle Columbia, the attacks of 9/11, and 21 hurricanes including Hurricane Katrina, we are in need of continued and ongoing improvement.

Unfortunately, the last few years we have seen decreasing levels of federal appropriations. The most recent appropriation of \$25 million provided each task force with about \$700,000. According to FEMA, it costs approximately \$1.7 million annually to maintain a Task Force. That amount does not take into account responding to incidents, which are funded separately, only the cost of training and maintaining equipment. This leaves each task force with a \$1 million deficit. As I stated previously, these resources and equipment are not used for local emergency responses. This means a local agency must choose to subsidize a program that ostensibly provides the federal government with a response capability or to fund other local needs such as training, equipment, vehicles or facilities that can be used for local day to day emergency responses. Therefore, I respectfully urge Congress to appropriate the \$45 million authorized for 2008 in last year's appropriations bill.

Finally, the National USAR System needs to address various administrative and program issues. That is why I am excited about the legislation that Congresswoman Sanchez has introduced which will achieve the following:

1. Authorize the National USAR System and 28 Task Forces as a program under FEMA and allows activation for pre-staging and training activities. Currently, the Task Forces may only be activated during a Presidential declared emergency.
2. Protect task force members and sponsoring agencies by allowing FEMA to reimburse for costs associated with deployment. Specifically, members and sponsors need to be fully reimbursed for costs associated with workers compensation and health claims arising from a member's injury on a federal mission.
3. Protects civilian members of the US&R System (non-uniformed personnel such as physicians, structural engineers, and canine handlers) from employment discrimination and retaliation for engaging in federal US&R activities. For example, we faced this situation when one of our heavy riggers, Don Childress, faced termination from his civilian employer if he chose to respond with us to New Orleans. Fortunately for us, Don came but he did lose his job.
4. Establish a standing advisory committee comprised of sponsoring agency representatives, technical experts and emergency response professionals to advise FEMA and DHS regarding matters affecting the National USAR System.

5. Lastly, yet most importantly authorize \$52 million in appropriations to fully fund the system.

Again, I can not stress how important it is to provide stable funding so that the Task Forces are secure in knowing that they can expend current year funds without the risk of acquiring equipment or hiring personnel that will not be funded in following years.

I hope my testimony and information provided will assist the committee in moving forward our legislation and also in your broader deliberations regarding national response capabilities. Thank you again Chairman Cuellar, Ranking Member Charles Dent and members of the committee for your time.