

After Action Report

Operation Cherokee Rose

FSIS-State Food Defense Partnership Exercise

June 5, 2008

Food Safety and Inspection Service

**Final Report
July 31, 2008**

Background

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is actively addressing the need to maintain the safety and defense of the country's food supply. During a crisis, it is critical that the Department be able to efficiently and effectively coordinate with its counterparts at the state and local level, as well as within other federal agencies and the private sector. On June 5, 2008, USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) conducted a tabletop exercise, "Operation Cherokee Rose", in Atlanta, GA and at FSIS headquarters in Washington, DC. The exercise focused on the roles of federal, state, and local government agencies and the food industry to work together to detect, respond to, and recover from a non-routine emergency incident. Emphasis was placed on a team approach to incident response, coordination, integration of capabilities, problem identification, and resolution through preparation, response, recovery, and multi-agency coordination. The exercise offered FSIS the opportunity to test and validate operating guidelines and directives for responding to a non-routine incident involving the intentional adulteration of food products within an FSIS inspected facility. The ultimate goals were:

- Minimizing suffering, loss of life, and personal injury;
- Minimizing damage to property; and
- Minimizing disaster- or emergency-related service disruption, which would have an adverse impact on the government, the communities, and the businesses and their employees, reputation, and product brand names.

This report identifies areas of strengths and weaknesses that were observed during the exercise and offers recommendations for improvement.

Objectives

Operation Cherokee Rose focused on enhancing the coordination and communication between FSIS, other regional federal agencies, state and local government agencies, and industry stakeholders. The objectives for the exercise were to clarify roles and responsibilities and improve coordination and communication among:

- FSIS Program Offices and associated field staffs;
- State and local public health and emergency response agencies;
- Primary Federal emergency response organizations; and
- Private sector stakeholders in the food industry.

Strengths of the Exercise – What Worked Well?

The exercise involved participation by the following stakeholder groups:

- FSIS field and Headquarters personnel from OFO, OPEER, OPHS, OIA, OM, OPPD, OPACE and OFDER
- Staff from APHIS, FDA, DHS, FBI, USDA Office of Inspector General, and the U.S. Army
- State of Georgia government agencies, including the Department of Human Resources Environmental Health and East Metro Health District, Georgia Division of Public Health, and Georgia Department of Agriculture.
- Local stakeholders, including Dekalb County Board of Health, Cobb and Douglas County Public Health, and Fulton County Department of Health.
- Food industry, including the Georgia Restaurant Association, U.S. Poultry and Egg Association, Sara Lee Corporation, and Koch Foods LLC.

Participants were actively engaged in the exercise. There was open dialogue and networking among stakeholder groups.

Areas for Improvement – What Did Not Work Well in the Exercise?

Exercise Structure

Several participants suggested that the exercise should have included:

- regional EPA;
- Environmental Protection Division of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources;
- Consumer groups;
- State Office of Homeland Security/Emergency Management;
- State law enforcement;
- Local law enforcement and emergency response
- Physicians/clinical lab personnel; and
- more industry involvement.

Several participants commented that the pace of the second half of the exercise was too slow, with too few injects. More injects or more detailed injects were needed. Also, less time should be allowed for discussion within stakeholder groups and more time should be allowed for the debrief periods at the end of each phase.

The epidemiological elements of the scenario were unrealistic, in that local public health would be continually learning new information during the course of real-life outbreak investigations.

Communication/Coordination

The media were not realistically portrayed in the exercise – the scenario needs more media pressure. Provide an opportunity for the role of the Joint Information Center (JIC) to be played.

Stakeholder group Public Information Officers (PIOs) should be encouraged to participate in future exercises.

Many participants noted that the exercise illustrated the need to improve communication and coordination among all stakeholder groups, especially with regard to creating a unified message.

A number of participants felt that an Incident Command System (ICS) structure was lacking and that it was not clear which organization was in charge of various response activities.

Incident Command System (ICS) Issues

What triggered each stakeholder group to organize into or participate in a multi-agency incident command structure?

- Local – requirement for participation by multiple local agencies
- State of Georgia – multiple agency involvement and need for coordination
- FSIS – public health outcomes of incident
- Industry – not clear
- Other Federal Agencies – number of people sick

What was the effectiveness of the ICS structure for this exercise?

- Local – coordination effective
- State of Georgia – ICS was effective, especially with consistent messaging
- FSIS – the ICS structure was effective
- Industry – difficult to comment on effectiveness of ICS structure; a similar structure is needed within industry
- Other Federal Agencies – ICS was effective – kept communication open

Who was in charge?

- Local – initial Incident Command was at the local level (local public health); then federal public health
- State of Georgia – local public health; then FSIS
- FSIS – FSIS initially; then local and state governments
- Industry – not clear
- Other Federal Agencies – FBI in charge of criminal investigation

Were decisions coordinated among stakeholder groups?

- Local – yes
- State of Georgia – yes
- FSIS – yes
- Industry – decisions were coordinated but industry was the last to find out
- Other Federal Agencies – as much as possible, given criminal investigation

Other Observations

In real world scenario, industry has information that can be shared much more quickly than indicated in exercise injects (e.g., product distribution lists).