

aLanguageBank TRANSCRIPT for FEMA

TITLE: California Presser

TOPIC: California Wildfires

DATE: October 31, 2007

LENGTH: 20 minutes, 55 seconds

PARTICIPANTS: David Paulison, Administrator, FEMA
Nancy Ward, Regional Administrator, FEMA Region IX
Henry Renteria, Director, CA Office of Emergency Services

Non-speaking, but present:
Carlos Castillo, Assistant Administrator, FEMA Disaster Assistance
Michael Hall, Federal Coordinating Officer, FEMA

Carrie Rhonheimer [PH], CNN
Unidentified Female1, AP
Jackie Scahill [PH], KBCC Public Radio
Unidentified Male1 Reporter
Unidentified Male2 Reporter
Unidentified Female2 Reporter

ABBREVIATIONS: [U/I] = Unintelligible
[PH] = Phonetic Spelling

Speaker

Transcription

Nancy Ward: Good afternoon. My name is Nancy Ward. I am the regional administrator for FEMA Region IX and California is in my area of responsibility. Welcome to the Joint Field office. The Joint Field office has been established to bring together state and federal agencies to partner in helping the citizens of California. It's my pleasure to introduce to you the Administrator of the Federal

Emergency Management Agency, David Paulison.

David Paulison:

Thanks, guys, and Nancy, thanks a lot. I appreciate it. Let me just do a couple things, and I've got some facts I want to share with you. One, I want to thank the firefighters that are out there putting their lives on the line protecting the homes and the lives of people of California. The fact that we have city, county, state, and federal firefighters from the Department of Interior and Department of Agriculture working together, the fact that we worked very hard together to fix those things that happened in Katrina to make sure they didn't happen here, the fact that we have the federal agencies working together, made me very proud of the response here in California. We've done several things. We're moving out of the response phase into our recovery phase, although we still have firefighting going on so we've done a couple of things. We know what we're going to have issues with. One is housing, so we have put together a state and federal housing task force to deal with those short-term and long-term housing issues. We're also going to have an issue with debris removal. We've also put together a state/federal debris removal task force to deal with the debris removal, and how we're going to take that off of there and where we're going to put it. We're going to have issues with some of our tribes out there—Native

Americans—so we've put together the task force also to deal specifically with the tribal issues of how we're going to deal with some of the housing. We know some of the areas have lost a lot of the housing for our Native Americans out there. And then we've also put together a multi-agency support group to deal with the flooding and the erosion that we know we're going to have from past history that we've had here. We've already started registering people. We have registered over 12,000 Californians—12,000 households for FEMA assistance. We have more than 5,000 individuals that have been referred to our individual housing program and we have already approved for distribution to individuals over \$3.3 million, just in a few short days since these fires started. We have almost 200 housing inspectors on the ground and they have already inspected over 3,000 properties. And we have 150 community relation specialists out there working, going to neighborhood to neighborhood, house to house, to make sure people understand how to get registered with FEMA, and to pass out the literature they need to to get registered. This has truly, truly been a partnership in development. The system that we've used in the past of waiting for a local community to become overwhelmed before the state steps in and waiting for the state to become

overwhelmed before the federal government steps in simply does not work. We saw that in Katrina. We are developing what we call an engaged partnership where we are all working together using a unified command system that was originally developed here in California and for here. For all of our disasters we're using that, and that has worked extremely well. We have been working together, not dealing with problems but dealing with issues. And as they come up, since we are working together out of one place, we can resolve those issues as we move along. Again, I'm very proud of what's happened so far. We are not going to drop the ball. We are not going to rest on our laurels. We know we have some significant issues coming down the road, particularly, like I said, with housing and debris removal. FEMA, the rest of the federal family is here for the long haul and we're going to make sure that we see this through to the very end. What I'd like to do right now is introduce a person from the Office of Emergency Management here in California, Henry Renteria. We have worked very closely with him and with the local community and it's because of that partnership that we've been able to have this type of response. Henry?

Henry Renteria:

Thank you, Dave. I just echo all the things that Administrator Paulison just said about our rapid response and our ability to

work together. We've been so used to being asked questions about why things go wrong. Well, I'm anticipating we're going to get a lot of questions of why things went right. And part of the reason we're going to get those questions is things are working. As the Governor has said, every day he's been out there, the sprint is over; we're now starting with the marathon and the marathon is dealing with the recovery efforts of all of these individuals and victims of this fire. The response is still happening. All the fires are not out yet but the recovery efforts are in full gear. Our goal right now is to make sure that we identify every single victim. They must come forward, let us know what their needs are and we'll work with them and identify whether state and federal partners are there to help them. As you can see by the representatives here today, we have state, federal, and local agencies represented that have been working with us side-by-side. And in this joint operation center, it will continue to be the focus of helping these individuals. This system works. As Director Paulison said, this is not a Katrina being lived over again. Things work in California because California has experience with disasters. California invented the incident command system through our fire service that evolved into the standardized emergency management system. We use it every

day and every single event that we respond to, and we know, we practice it, we live by it, and now you're seeing the results of it. That's why things are working well. We'll continue with our partnership with our federal, local, and other state agency partners. This is all about leadership through partnership. We're making it work for us. I'm very pleased at this response. I'm very pleased at everything that's happening. We'll continue to provide ongoing support to our partners and to the communities. And the Governor's still out there every single day. He's been in it since the fires first started and he'll continue to make sure that we at the state level fulfill the needs of those victims. So thank you again very much and we'll turn it back over to Director Paulison.

David Paulison: What we'd like to do now is answer any questions you might have. If we'd ask you to use a microphone and those of you who know me know I wear hearing aids so you really have to speak up so I can hear you. And just tell me who you are and where you're from.

Carrie Rhonheimer: Carrie Rhonheimer with CNN. Mr. Renteria, what is the state doing specifically to abate the landslide threat that will be the next disaster-type situation that will come up in the wake of the fires?

Henry Renteria: We always are cognizant of that fact that after you have a major

fire like this, there's a lot of land that's basically been denuded of all vegetation. And with rains, there's always a possibility that we'll have other complications that result from it. Part of what our efforts are as we do the damage assessment is also to look at the potential mitigation of any future events. So there are folks in the field working with the locals to identify any potential threats and any potential hazards. USGS—Department of Geological Survey—is with us in this respect. Our local state agencies that are responsible for those types of things are out there also. They're identifying what some of the potential problems will be. Obviously, the solution's going to be rapid erosion control, rapid debris management, and erosion control. Those are the things we're going to be concentrating on next and we'll be working very closely with the locals to identify where those necessary actions need to take place. Working with our federal partners, we'll see what is eligible that can be reimbursed by state and federal, local resources.

David Paulison: Any other questions? Don't be shy.

Unidentified Female1, AP: Hi. I'm with the AP. And I have a few questions actually. How many people in San Diego right now are displaced and where are they?

David Paulison: How many people are displaced?

*Unidentified
Female1, AP:*

Yes.

David Paulison:

Henry, do you want to answer that?

Henry Renteria:

I think we still have approximately 180 people in shelters that are being served that, obviously, have no other place to go. At one point, we had well over 20,000 people in shelters. But remember, some of these folks have other means. They've been put in hotels or they're staying with friends. Right now, our primary concern are the people in the shelters. We don't want to keep people in shelters too long. We want to put them in some sort of facility that's more conducive to a home life. So the Red Cross, FEMA, ourselves, we're working very closely to identify where these people can best be placed. And remember, some of these fires are still burning so they're not allowed to go back into their areas. Some of these people may still have homes, they just don't know it yet. So at this point, our role is to identify and get the rest of these people out of shelters and into a better place.

*Unidentified
Female1, AP:*

Well, for those who have completely lost their homes, it's going to take a while to figure things out. What's going to happen to them? Are they going to get money for rent or temporary shelter somewhere in the area?

David Paulison:

Yeah, that's why we put together a joint-housing task force with the state and with our federal partners. We brought in HUD. About 15 percent of the homes that have been destroyed were HUD properties. The Veterans Administration also is working with us. They have a lot of housing in this area. We're already out in the field identifying available properties that we can rent. There's a possibility that we could use mobile homes in some of the remote areas, particularly in some of the tribal areas. So that's why we put this task force together. The Department of Interior, Department of Agriculture also has housing; they're all part of this task force to deal with, not just the short-term piece but also the long-term piece. There were people from registration centers that were from the Cedar fire and they were there, volunteering to show people exactly how long it took them to get back in their homes from the time their home was burned down until it was fully finished, back in place. Talking about getting permits, clearing the lot, getting a builder, getting an architect—all those things it takes to do that. It's going to take a while, and so that's why we need a long-term solution to the housing and that's why we put this housing task force together. That's going to be a very important piece to this disaster.

*Unidentified
Female1, AP:*

Do you have a rough idea of how much the fires in all the

southern California counties—how much they've cost in damages and the fire-fighting costs?

David Paulison

Well, if you're asking how much the fire is going to cost, well, we don't have an estimate yet. We will have, sooner or later. A lot of people have private insurance, some don't. It's a matter of how much money we spend on fire fighting, how much money we're going to spend on debris removal, how much money is going to come out of FEMA for individual assistance, how much public assistance is going to be available. We're doing preliminary damage assessments starting tomorrow with the state to see what public infrastructures were damaged and it'll take a while to get all those dollars together.

Unidentified Female 1, AP:

When you do figure it out, who's going to pay for what? Have you figured that out?

David Paulison:

Well, parts of it FEMA will pay for under the Stafford Act, the public-assistance piece will be paid for by FEMA. Some of the individual assistance will be paid for by FEMA. The state will have costs that, some will be reimbursable, some not. The Department of Agriculture, the fire-fighting piece—some of it will be paid by them, so it's going to be a total aggregate of everybody who's responded to this disaster, a lot of it by private insurance companies if you have homeowner's insurance, like

most people did.

*Unidentified
Female1, AP:*

Thank you

Jackie Scahill:

Hi, my name is Jackie Scahill. I'm with KBCC, southern California public radio. I have a quick question for Mr. Renteria. I know you said people will be asking what went right and I don't mean to be "Debbie Downer," but there has been a lot of criticism from local officials about the planes that were supposed to be aired to drop flame retardant on the fires at a critical time, but they were just bogged down in red tape. To my knowledge, they were supposed to be fixed four years ago. How come they weren't ready? Why, over the four years, were they not fixed?

Henry Renteria:

I think Chief Grijalva with the Cal. Fire has addressed this issue over and over again. The issue is: we had every available aircraft in the air at all times that was safe to have them in the air. There were periods of time the aircraft could not fly. There were periods of time that aircraft did not have the appropriate personnel on those aircraft to fly safely. Remember, while we're fighting these fires, we also have to think public safety, not only of the people on the ground, but the people in the air, and the last thing we want is a tragedy where we have airplanes crashing into each other or retardant being dropped in the wrong place or on top of

firefighters, so it's a very complicated process. I'm not a firefighter; I'm not going to get into detail, but I know from what I've heard from Chief Grijalva, that every available resource was deployed and will continue to be deployed. We're even ramping up now for this possible weekend, for the possible Santa Ana winds that may result over the weather for this weekend. So now we will take a look, we'll take a very close look once the fires are out, once every firefighter is back home and safe, we'll take every possible look to see what worked and what did not work and we'll address it then.

Jackie Scahill: Thanks, and just one more question that I think many of us are wondering. In stage of, in light of the news conference last week, FEMA is an organization that the public needs to trust and I'm just wondering, how do you plan in gaining the trust back after it's been bruised after Katrina, and then after this conference?

David Paulison: The news conference last week was regrettable, it should not have happened. My inquiries so far tells me that it was not intended to be that way, but it ended up, they made some very poor decisions and I'm going to fix that; however I'm not going to let it detract me or the agency from what we're doing here. How we're going to gain the public trust back is by how we're responding here, how we're responded with hurricane Dean, how

we responded in Greensburg, Kansas, and what we're doing here on this disaster scene. We've been working for two years to change the culture of how this country responds to disasters. I saw a bright side of that during TOPOFF 4 a couple of weeks ago. Again, curious how it was going to work out in a real-life incident and it has come to fruition here where we're all are working together like we should have done in Katrina and other events. So, yes, that was unfortunate, it sets us back; those things happen. I'm going to fix it, but it's not going to detract me from what we're doing and to make sure that this agency is capable of responding like it should.

Jackie Scahill: Thank you.

Unidentified Male 1 Reporter: Just a follow-up on that last one, Director. Did you know the people asking the questions to you at that time were FEMA people at all?

David Paulison: No, I was here in California actually, and when I landed Thursday night, Friday morning, and picked up the newspaper and saw it, obviously I was incredulous of what I saw. That's not my philosophy. Those of you in the media that know me, that I run an open organization, that's what I want. In hindsight, they

should have shut the press conference down if no media didn't show up, and I've done several things to fix that. One, we are going to give the media at least an hour's notice, particularly with the television people who have to come there with cameras, at least a one-hour notice. No FEMA people will be asking questions, ever again. And three, call-ins will be able to ask questions. It does not make sense to me, why would you have a reporter on the line if they can't ask a question? That's what they're there for. When I ran the fire department in Miami Dade County, and ran emergency management for hurricanes, my sole means of getting my word out was through the media, and that's what I want here. So I want a good relationship with them. What happened should not have happened. It will not happen again, and I'm going to make sure that it doesn't and make sure we're going to put fixes in place to develop a partnership with the media instead of something that's adversarial.

*Unidentified Male 1
Reporter:*

Now a question on the anticipated winds coming this week, by any of you, any of you, what's being put in place...and I know the winds are not expected to be like they were last week, but they are back, everyone's on edge a bit. What things are being put in place to make sure that these winds don't result in more fires?

David Paulison: I just came from the base camp before I came here. I spent about three hours there, talking to the firefighters, talking to the people from local fire departments from the state, California firefighters, and also from the federal firefighters, and what they were doing is they've already got an assessment of where the possibilities are should the winds shift and come back with the Santa Ana winds, where they could possibly go through the different places. And they're pre-positioning firefighters and pre-positioning equipment so if something does happen, if they do flare up again, if they do get out through one of the valleys, they'll be able to stop those. And they're very comfortable with that. I don't know if, do you want to talk about that?

Henry Renteria: Yeah, briefly this morning we met with local officials. Local county and city aircraft are also being pre-positioned, both in L.A. County, L.A. City and the other cities that have them. Also, we're looking at military resources and private resources, contracted helicopters and other fixed-wing materials. So we're looking ahead and seeing what we need to have to respond as quickly as possible. The winds are not anticipated to be as bad as they were when this fire started; however, any Santa Ana winds are something to be concerned about, so we'll be ready.

Unidentified Male1 Reporter: It's a bit of a guessing game though. You have to sort of estimate what areas would be vulnerable. Am I right?

Henry Renteria: Absolutely, because again, fires are still burning. We hope to have most of them out, if not completely out, by the weekend, but if any of those are still burning, those will be critical to respond to first. But we'll rely on our fire folks to give us that indication of where they need the resources.

Unidentified Male2 Reporter: For Mr. Renteria, I believe. I've been told that half of the CDF engines that were up at Lake Arrowhead on Sunday were sent to Malibu. Obviously Lake Arrowhead wasn't burning until Monday. Is there going to be some thought whether OES or people in the future, if you know this big wind is coming, should have more engines stationed in a place that is not yet burning so they don't have to get rid of some of their engines? I've been told that they only had four to five engines up there Monday when the fire broke out.

Henry Renteria: Right. Again, those are decisions that are made by field command staff, firefighters, fire chiefs, that have a lot more experience than I do. But what I have heard at briefings is that this is a multi-agency command question and assessment. They'll certainly work with my office because my office coordinates mutual aid, where other resources will be needed

from other parts of the cities or counties around the state that we can be deployed and brought in also. But again, those are decisions that are made by field command staff that are monitoring the fire, they're fighting these fires now, and they're the ones that are best-suited to make those decisions. As we get closer to the day that the winds start, then I'm sure there will be other adjustments made to that, but they're on top of this. I'm very comfortable with that.

Unidentified Male2 Reporter:

Do you have enough in your budget to provide fire engines from OES?

Henry Renteria:

According to Chief [Grijalva](#), this morning, he feels very confident that we have all the resources that we need at this point.

Deleted: Coholvo

Remember, we're also having to send some people home to get rest too, so we're looking at what other resources we can bring in from other parts of the state that have not responded yet, but at this point, we are comfortable and ready to respond.

Unidentified Woman2 Reporter:

Just one more question for you, Mr. Renteria. How many aircraft does the state have standing by this weekend coming up, and how many did they have last weekend when the fires were still sort of in their nascent stages largely?

Henry Renteria:

I really don't have numbers in front of me. I mean, I can get that information to you later, but again, that's a question you need to

convey to Cal. Fire and to mutual aid coordinators. And we have some people here who can probably answer that question, but I don't have it in front of me.

David Paulison: Any other questions, folks? Thank you very much and I appreciate your being here. Thank you.