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## **THE PLUMAS COUNTY OFFICE OF EMERGENCY SERVICES (OES)**

### **Reason for Investigation**

Since the events that occurred on September 11, 2001, the Federal Government and the State of California have enacted new laws and procedures to protect the public safety and property, to provide an organizational structure to guide emergency responders, and to provide for reimbursement to local responding agencies. The 2007-2008 Plumas County Grand Jury decided to inquire into Plumas OES as a result of these changes and in light of recent events in Plumas County that have been featured in the local news papers. We were aware of concerns with the processes and procedures being employed by the Plumas County OES. In addition, the Plumas County Grand Jury has not previously examined the Office of Emergency Services.

### **Procedure**

We used three important investigatory methods to obtain our results; observations, research, and interviews. Observations were conducted at Quincy Fire Department/HAZMAT, Peninsula Fire Department, Plumas County Sheriffs Department Communications Center, and the railroad spill site at Storrie. Documents reviewed included Plumas County Emergency Operations Plan; Plumas County Multi-Hazard Mitigation Plan; Plumas County Hazardous Materials Response Plan; and California OES website.

The Grand Jury interviewed:

- 1 Director of the Office of Emergency Services,
- 2 Assistant Director of the Office of Emergency Services,
- 3 Chief of the Quincy Fire Department
- 4 Director of Plumas County HAZMAT,
- 5 The Director of Environmental Health
- 6 Communications Specialists with the Sheriff's Department
- 7 Plumas County Risk Management Director
- 8 County Auditor
- 9 Local Citizens

## **Background**

The Governor's Office of Emergency Services (OES) serves as the lead state agency for emergency management in California. Its mission is to ensure the state is ready and able to mitigate against, prepare for, respond to, and recover from the effects of emergencies that threaten lives, property and the environment. The state OES coordinates the activities of all state agencies relating to preparation and implementation of the State Emergency Plan. OES also coordinates the response efforts of state and local agencies and the integration of federal resources into state and local response and recovery operations. The *California Emergency Services Act* (ESA) found in Government Code Chapter 7 of Division 1 of Title 2 provides the basic legal authorities for emergency management in the state.

The state's 58 counties are grouped into three OES Administrative Regions - Coastal, Inland, and Southern. The operational area of Plumas OES encompasses Plumas County and all the political subdivisions located within its boundaries. On-scene responders such as law enforcement, fire services and public works personnel conduct direct response activities. Independent agencies can augment the American Red Cross and other relief agencies.

California Government Code, Section 8607, requires the development of a Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS), which is a uniform method for managing emergencies. Local government agencies must use SEMS to be eligible for State reimbursement of eligible response related personnel costs resulting from a disaster.

California State Government Code, Section 8610 states Counties and cities may create disaster councils by ordinance. A disaster council shall develop plans for meeting any condition constituting a local emergency or state of emergency. The Multi-Agency Coordination Group is the local disaster council in Plumas County and is composed of key personnel from:

1. Environmental Health Department
2. Public Health Department
3. HAZMAT Response Team
4. Fire Department Representatives
5. Sheriff's Office
6. Highway Patrol
7. Public Works Department
8. Road Department
9. Board of Supervisors

10. CAO of Plumas County
11. Clerk to the BOS
12. County Clerk
13. Department of Social Services
14. US Forest Service
15. Cal Trans
16. Plumas Sierra Rural Electric Co-Op.
17. American Red Cross
18. Plumas District Safety Officer
19. City of Portola Administrator
20. Director of Plumas County Office of Emergency Services

California State Government Code, Section 8613 states that “Should an accredited disaster council fail to comply with the rules and regulations of the Office of Emergency Services in any material degree, the office may revoke its certification”.

The Plumas County Office of Emergency Services, working with the Plumas County Environmental Health Department is responsible for overall pre-emergency planning and coordination among the various emergency responders. This includes coordination of emergency assistance between contiguous jurisdictions.

The State and Federal Governments help local jurisdictions cover the cost of disasters. To get this help, Plumas County must declare a local emergency within 10 days of the actual occurrence of a disaster. The County must then assess damages, and apply for aid within 60 days after the Proclamation of a Local Emergency and contact the State Office of Emergency Services for assistance information. Federal aid, coordinated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), is given at the request of the Governor.

The Office of Emergency Services is responsible for assisting the various county departments in the preparation and tracking of such claims, and should coordinate the filing of claims.

As with all mandated government activities an adequate level of funding is critical. During the interview process it became apparent that there are many funding gaps in the Plumas Office of Emergency Services. The various agencies have been left to seek their own funding through grants, special district allocations and fund raising efforts.

During the Grand Jury interview process the interviewees were asked if the Office of Emergency Services has conducted full, "in the field" countywide preparedness drills to test the system. The general response was that "the personnel in each department are responsible to make sure that their own departments are safe, properly trained, know the OES rules, and know their responsibilities in emergency situations". Apparently there was a "table top" OES exercise conducted within the past two years when the only full field exercise was cancelled because of inclement weather.

It should be noted that on March 11, 2008 the Plumas County Board of Supervisors accepted the resignation of the Director of the Plumas OES and also his resignation as the County Fire Marshall.

## **Findings and Recommendations**

### **Finding #1**

The Plumas County Organizational Chart obtained from the Human Resources Department by the Grand Jury, dated June 12, 2007 does not include the Plumas Office of Emergency Services, which calls into question the historical chain of command and the extent of the OES assimilation into Plumas County operations.

### **Recommendation #1**

The Plumas County Organizational Chart should be amended to reflect the proper chain of command.

### **Finding #2**

While numerous individual emergency responder agencies in Plumas County possess high levels of training, skill and performance capabilities, there is a lack of inter-agency communication and coordination training. This is in direct violation of the Office of Emergency Services State mandate.

The director and the assistant director have not met on a regular basis with the effect that the assistant director is not always advised of the current situations.

## **Recommendation #2**

The Office of Emergency Services, in conjunction with the Environmental Health Department, should conduct regular disaster exercises with all response agencies and with voluntary participation of business representatives.

The Director and Assistant Director should meet as frequently as necessary to insure that the assistant director is fully advised of all situations.

## **Finding #3**

The Multi Agency Coordination Group, which is the local disaster council, does not meet on a regular basis. It is the responsibility of the Director of Emergency Services to schedule these meetings.

## **Recommendation #3**

The Multi Agency Coordination Group should meet on a regular basis. The Director of Emergency Services should schedule these meetings.

## **Finding #4**

There is a serious retention issue concerning the HAZMAT responders. After these responders are trained, they are often recruited by outside agencies that provide better compensation.

## **Recommendation #4**

HAZMAT responders who are trained through Plumas County should receive a pay differential to maintain certification. In addition, they should be required to sign a contractual agreement stating that they will serve the county for a minimal time period or reimburse the county for training expenses.

## **Finding #5**

On June 30, 2007 there was a 22-railcar derailment that released toxic chemicals and residents were ordered to evacuate. The Emergency Command Center was not activated nor was the Plumas County Emergency Operations Plan implemented. As a result, post evacuation care was not provided as required by the Plumas County Emergency Operations Plan.

### **Recommendation #5**

In the event of future occurrences, the Office of Emergency Services should activate the Emergency Command Center and implement the Plumas County Emergency Operations Plan. A reception and care site should be activated to provide evacuees with information on the incident and directions to temporary housing.

The Director of Emergency Services should contact the displaced county residents to mitigate their evacuation expenses and to keep them apprised of the current situation concerning the cleanup of the site and when it is safe to return to their residences.

### **Finding #6**

The Director of Emergency Services has not sought reimbursement from the state and federal governments for Hazardous Spills, Fire Fighting efforts by the Special District responders, or for the Claremont Dynamite incident in Quincy.

### **Recommendation #6**

The Director of Emergency Services should seek reimbursement through the State and Federal Governments and follow the procedures set forth in the document that was adopted by the Plumas County Board of Supervisors on September 13, 2005 by Resolution No. 05-7200.

### **Finding #7**

The Director of Emergency Services has left the grant seeking process to individual departments.

### **Recommendation #7**

The Director should also be responsible for the coordination of grant writing activities for the different departments to insure that all needs are being addressed.

### **Finding #8**

The new communication system at the Sheriff's Office is truly state of the art. The system is hooked up to all agencies in California so that help can be requested

quickly. The Communication Center is fully staffed with eight operators. They have two people on duty 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Currently they are working on:

- The reverse 911 system
- Voting receivers that will select the strongest receiver signal automatically
- Wireless broadband communications

## **Recommendations #8**

The Grand Jury commends the Sheriff's Communication Department and more specifically, Mike Grant, for the new Communication Center. It has taken a tremendous effort to bring Plumas County into the 21<sup>st</sup> century of communications. And this deserves our gratitude and special recognition. We further recommend that the Plumas County Board of Supervisors formally recognize Mr. Grant for his outstanding efforts.

## **Conclusion**

The Plumas County Organizational Chart obtained from the Human Resources Department by the Grand Jury, dated June 12, 2007 does not include the Plumas Office of Emergency Services. There is a lack of inter-agency communication and coordination training. The Multi Agency Coordination Group, which is the local disaster council, does not meet on a regular basis. There is a serious retention issue concerning the HAZMAT responders. On June 30, 2007 there was a 22-railcar derailment that resulted in the release of toxic chemicals, the Emergency Command Center was not activated nor was the Plumas County Emergency Operations Plan implemented. The Director of Emergency Services has not sought reimbursement from the state and federal governments for Hazardous Spills, Fire Fighting efforts by the Special District responders, or for the Claremont Dynamite incident in Quincy. The Director of Emergency Services has left the grant seeking process to individual departments. The responsibility for correcting these issues lies with the Plumas County Board of Supervisors and the Director of Emergency Services.

Currently the Board of Supervisors is seeking a new candidate for the position of Director of Emergency Services. It is critical that the new director has a clear understanding of the State and Federal regulations.