

REGION 2 BI-WEEKLY

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NATIONAL EMERGENCY DECLARED AFTER FIREBALL Gas Leak At P.R. Oil Refinery Likened to “Earthquake” ; ESF-15 Activated; Fire Grants, Preparedness Pays Off

Just after midnight on October 23rd, the residents of the San Juan metro area in Puerto Rico were shaken by the largest explosion in the island’s history. The blast measured 2.8 on the Richter Magnitude Scale. It was caused by the explosion of 21 oil tanks at the Caribbean Petroleum Corporation. An additional 19 oil tanks were saved. FBI investigators say a gas leak on site sparked the inferno.

Five hundred and thirty firefighters from Puerto Rico’s Fire Department responded immediately, and were able to contain the blaze in record time. They were assisted by the island’s Metro Emergency Response Team (MERT) a volunteer firefighters’ organization.

Within hours, President Obama granted Governor Luis Fortuno’s request for a national emergency declaration, setting in motion the Caribbean Area Division’s procedures for supporting the Commonwealth’s evacuation, response and clean-up efforts.

Region II’s External Affairs Director Kristina Simpson was tasked with activating ESF-15 to coordinate information from the various federal agencies



harnessed to support the Commonwealth’s response, including the US Coast Guard, the FBI, EPA, ATF and US Fish and Wildlife Services.

Federal Coordinating Officer Philip Parr cited the Assistance to Firefighters Grant Program (AFGP) as being a key element in the fast and efficient containment of the island’s unprecedented inferno.

AFGP provides assistance to build the capacity of firefighters and emergency medical services response organizations nationwide. During the last eight years, Puerto Rico has received more than \$5 million in AFGP grants to acquire necessary equipment, protective gear, emergency vehicles, training, and other assets. An AFGP grant enabled MERT to acquire a Custom Rescue Pumper fire truck, which played a key role in the fire suppression operations.

“As a former FDNY Battalion Chief, I can appreciate the Metro Emergency Response Team’s heroic efforts, and congratulate them on knowing how to take advantage of this valuable grant. Their initial response to the incident, and the follow up, is a sterling example of emergency management professionalism,” FCO Parr said.

THEY DO IT DIFFERENTLY ‘DOWN UNDER



Region II staffers were treated to a presentation on the difference between the Australian and the U.S. approach to emergency management last week, when Andrew Gissing (above), Director of Emergency Management Planning and Communication for the Victoria, Australia, State Emergency Service discussed his country's response to the historic bushfires that killed more than 170 people last February. The "Black Saturday" blaze was the worst in Australia's history, and prompted a review of that country's emergency management procedures.

As in the U.S., there are three tiers of government in Australia: the Commonwealth (or the federal government), the state, and local governments. The state has the lead role in emergency management, developing emergency management arrangements and designating control agencies for different hazards.

One major difference between the U.S. and Australia, however, is the extensive use of unpaid, but highly-trained volunteer first responders. There is a widespread "volunteer ethos in Australia," Gissing noted, stemming from the resilience historically necessary for Australians facing an often harsh environment.

Victoria's Country Fire Authority (CFA) is one of the largest [volunteer](#)-based firefighting organizations in the world, with approximately 70,000 fully trained and unpaid volunteers, serving over 500,000 square kilometers and nearly three million people. Nationwide, Gissing estimated that the total number of volunteer firefighters is between 300,000 and 400,000.

Over 75% of the CFA's funding comes from levies on fire insurance policies, and about 22% comes from the Victoria state government. Individual brigades receive further funds from local councils, their own fundraising activities and donations.

Australia's policy on evacuation is also different. Traditionally, adults have the right to stay and defend their homes if they choose, or they leave on their own before the situation becomes dire. This "stay-and-defend-or-leave-early" policy has its roots in Australians' roughed individualism, with some local officials defending the rights of adults to make their own decisions. However, this tradition is currently being reviewed by a state Royal Commission convened after the "Black Saturday" bushfires' horrific toll.



ARA Mike Moriarty (right) with guest lecturer Andrew Gissing from Australia OEM. Moriarty envisions this event as the beginning of a Continuing Professional Education program in Region II.

DAD LISTENS

Last week, Region II's Disaster Assistance Division (DAD) held a special "listening session" via video teleconference for our state and local partners to solicit ideas on how to improve the disaster recovery process.

The four-hour program was part of a national initiative led by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to develop a framework for the delivery of long term recovery assistance to communities hit by disaster. In the wake of Katrina, this is a high priority for the Obama Administration.

At the President's direction, the Secretaries of DHS and HUD are co-chairing a Long Term Recovery Working Group (LTRW) composed of the secretaries and administrators of more than 20 departments, agencies and offices. This high-level, strategic initiative will provide operational guidance for recovery organizations.

Five sites in the Region had VTC hook-ups: NJ EOC in Trenton; SEMO in Albany; the Buffalo JFO for DR-1857, which hosted representative from the Seneca nation; Puerto Rico, which participated via the CAD; and 26 Federal Plaza. The US Virgin Island called in by phone.

On Nov. 10, the process will open up to more Regional stakeholders with two Forums at the US Customs House in lower Manhattan. The two three-hour sessions — from 9am to noon, and from 1pm to 4pm — will provide a venue for suggestions on how to improve the disaster recovery process. Stakeholders will be asked to help the federal government define roles and responsibilities, develop communications strategies and establish measurements for success.

The initiative also will help identify gaps in disaster recovery, as well as overlapping or conflicting sources of authority. A comprehensive framework should ensure improved coordination of interagency planning, and better collaboration among federal agencies.

The public can comment via the LTRW website: DISASTERRECOVERYWORKING-GROUP.GOV

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FACES OF THE REGION



Jerry Gelbard, Grants Management Specialist

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Jerry came to Region II after 26 years with New York City EMS and FDNY EMS. Certified as a New York State Paramedic, he recently retired from the agency as an EMS Captain.

His assignments took him all over the city, with his last duty station being the FDNY Center for Terrorism and Disaster Preparedness in Bayside, Queens, where he was part of the team that planned, conducted and evaluated over 100 disaster preparedness exercises, including the OEM Operation SAFE PATH exercise at the World Trade Center station held last May.

In addition, Jerry holds a DHS-FEMA Master Practitioner Exercise Certification from the Emergency Management Institute (EMI) in 2004.

As the Region's newest Grants Management Specialist, Jerry will be using his expertise as a first responder to monitor grant funding in the management division. "I'll be looking at the money, not programs," he says, but conceded his familiarity with emergency preparedness and response will inform his analysis.

Jerry's "second career" coincides with a new life at home. The longtime bachelor recently married and is helping raise a 12-year-old step daughter. "There have been a lot of changes this past year," Jerry says. "But it's all good and pretty exciting, and it turns out my daughter makes a pretty mean oatmeal. "

R2 STARS AND (PIN) STRIPES

