



THE NEED TO FOCUS ON ALL HAZARDS RESPONSE

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presented to the

Colorado Homeland Security Summit

Governor Bill Ritter
Congressman Mark Udall
Congressman Ed Perlmutter
Mason Whitney, Colorado Homeland Security Director

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Good morning, Governor Ritter, Congressman Udall, Congressman Perlmutter, Director Whitney, staff and guests. I am Dave Parmley, Fire Chief of the Lake Dillon Fire Protection District, and Vice-President of the Colorado State Fire Chiefs' Association (CSFCA).

The purpose of the Colorado State Fire Chiefs' Association (CSFCA) is to provide leadership, education, and support to the Chief Officers of Colorado fire departments, in order to reduce the loss of life and property and to protect Colorado's citizens and institutions from all types of emergencies. In addition, we provide the Executive and Legislative branches of Colorado's government with information and recommendations in order to shape public policy that meets the goal of protecting those who live, work, and play in Colorado.

I would like to thank you for the opportunity to discuss the Colorado's preparedness for natural and manmade disasters and the interaction between local, state, and federal agencies. I have a prepared statement and will then be available to answer questions.

THE NEED TO FOCUS ON ALL HAZARDS RESPONSE

The invitation to this summit appropriately stated that "Colorado Homeland Security requires a unique partnership between federal, state and local agencies. To that end, we want to ensure that Colorado has the necessary resources to respond to any emergency situation, whether that is a natural disaster or a terrorist attack."

Colorado's fire service focuses on the importance of responding to both natural and manmade disasters. Last year, Colorado fire departments responded to more than 400,000 fire and emergency calls covering all hazards, including structural fires, wildland/urban interface fires, emergency medical situations, hazardous materials incidents, technical rescues, and natural disasters.¹ While most of these calls involved local emergencies, Colorado's fire service has responded to national disasters, such as Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

When fire departments take on such a national role, their lead partner within the federal government is FEMA. Since 9/11, much of the focus within FEMA's parent organization, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), has been on building terrorism response capabilities. While gaps still exist, these efforts have helped local fire and EMS providers become better prepared than ever before for chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, and explosive (CBRNE) incidents.

The CSFCA understands this focus on counter-terrorism as a natural reaction to the September 11th attacks; however, it is important to point out that the response to most incidents – whether natural or man-made – is strikingly similar. A common phrase in the fire service is that a "WMD attack is simply a hazardous materials incident with an attitude." A fire department's response to a chlorine gas attack would be very similar to a response to the chlorine tank car derailment and leak.

However, creating an emphasis in grant programs on specialized equipment for CBRNE events may steer important resources away from more fundamental areas of need such as access locally to required training, disaster preparedness, and implementation of proven strategies to effectively address communications interoperability. Over the long-term, this approach could deprive local responders of the tools necessary for an effective response to the next major wildfire, hurricane, or other natural disaster.

¹ Source: Colorado 2007 NFIRS Summary Data (http://www.colofirechiefs.org/docs/Colorado_NFIRS_2007.pdf)

Thus, it is important that both the state and federal government recognize that basic fire and EMS are essential not only for response to terrorism incidents, but other types of disasters as well. By strengthening basic fire and EMS capability, the result will be increased capacity for dealing with natural or man-made disasters.

Congress can play a constructive role by ensuring that FEMA-administered programs such as the Assistance to Firefighters Grant (AFG) and the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response Firefighters (SAFER) Act programs are well funded and remain focused on the response to all hazards.

The AFG program goes a long way towards helping departments address basic apparatus and equipment shortfalls, but the need is much greater than current funding can address. Furthermore, additional funding for training and exercises to include backfill and/or overtime is needed.

Likewise, the SAFER Act grant program provides needed financial assistance to departments to hire firefighters to help meet industry standards and community needs to provide adequate protection from fire and other hazards including acts of terrorism.

It is also important that decision-makers not lose sight of the fact that the individual resource used to handle fire suppression, EMS, Hazmat, or Urban Search and Rescue may be the same person. Thus, when evaluating capability to respond to natural or man-made disasters, we must be careful not to double-count these resources.

This leads me into a discussion of Colorado's system for the allocation, mobilization, and deployment of resources in the event of a disaster or incident that exceeds local capabilities.

Colorado Emergency Resource Mobilization Program

A key element of preparedness for natural and manmade disasters is the ability to provide appropriate resources in a timely fashion to support operational requirements. Colorado's Emergency Resource Mobilization Program is a partnership between local, state, and federal agencies and can serve as a model for other states.

The CSFCA is not a proponent of building standing armies of federal employees ready to respond in times of disaster. But rather, FEMA should create a nation-wide system for mobilizing local, state and federal resources, with provision for portal-to-portal payment of expenses and backfill of local resources. For this reason, Colorado's first responder community has partnered with the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC) in the development and implementation of Inter- and Intra-State mutual aid systems.² Chief Jerry Rhodes with the Cunningham Fire Protection District has been instrumental in taking a leading role to promote and develop this national model for mutual aid.

Colorado was the first state to pilot the U.S. Forest Service's (USFS) Resource Ordering and Status System (ROSS)³ as an all-risk system for the inventory, ordering, mobilizing, and status of resources. The CSFCA believes that ROSS, as a federal software application, should be deployed as the national resource mobilization system for all disasters and made available to state participation

² The IAFC's Inter- and Intra-State mutual aid projects were funded through a DHS grant.

³ ROSS is a National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG) sponsored information systems development project. ROSS is a computer software program which automates the resource ordering, status, and reporting process.

at no cost. Currently, however, the State of Colorado must pay the USFS more than \$100,000 annually to participate in the system.

DON'T LOSE SIGHT OF REAL, EVERYDAY RISKS

Wildland Urban Interface Fire Problem

Within the context of “all-hazards” preparedness, one of the greatest risks confronting Coloradoans is the threat of catastrophic wildfire. With thirty-five percent of Colorado’s land area being federal lands, many communities, neighborhoods, and subdivisions are surrounded by public lands that are largely undeveloped and a source of vegetative fuels and wildfire risk potential.⁴ Declining forest health and ever-increasing development in wildland urban interface areas has increased the risk of catastrophic wildfire.

While the risk of wildfire cannot be eliminated, definitive measures can be taken to mitigate the impact of catastrophic wildfire by reducing the fire behavior potential in areas at highest risk. All agencies, federal, state, and local must work together as they try to cope with the ever-present risk of catastrophic wildfire.

Currently, the federal land management system is unable to accomplish critical management tasks on their own in a timely fashion, and bureaucratic obstacles confront private land owners in their wildfire mitigation efforts.

For example, private land owners that own land adjacent to USFS lands can not conduct defensible space treatments on the National Forest lands without USFS permission and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process being completed. The NEPA process can take up to a year to complete once a project location has been identified.

Declining Volunteers

Sixty-two percent of the fire departments in Colorado are all-volunteer. Volunteer fire departments across the state are facing great difficulty in maintaining their ranks of volunteer fire fighters. Some of the factors contributing to reductions in the number of men and women joining and remaining in the volunteer fire service include increasing time demands, increasing training requirements, increasing call volume, changes in the ‘nature of the business’ of firefighting, changes in sociological conditions (two-income families), federal regulations, and aging communities.

Some of the most influential recruitment and retention incentives identified by volunteer fire service leaders include college education tuition, income tax credits, health insurance and the provision of better personal protective clothing, firefighting apparatus and equipment.

National Fire Incident Reporting System

Fire takes a serious toll upon Colorado’s political, social, medical, justice, and economic systems. In 2007, there were a reported 15,000 fires in Colorado which claimed the lives of 21 civilians and

⁴ Source: Federal Lands in Colorado (<http://www.colorado.edu/Libraries/govpubs/fedlands.htm>)

injured 233 more – many of whom will be crippled or disfigured for life. These fires damaged or destroy more than \$132 million in property.⁵

In addition to direct property losses, fire costs the public millions of dollars each year in lost jobs, business and tax revenues, long term medical care, and escalating insurance premiums. According to the U.S. Fire Administration (USFA), the indirect costs of fire may be as much as eight to ten times higher than the direct costs of fire.⁶ Thus, the State of Colorado is likely losing more than a billion dollars each year to fire. And that figure does not include the millions spent dealing with wildfires each year. Nor does it account for the hundreds of firefighters injured; and this year alone, four firefighters killed, while protecting the citizens of Colorado.

A crucial component to impacting Colorado's and the nation's fire problem is timely and accurate data collected through the National Fire Incident Reporting System – a program administered by the U.S. Fire Administration (USFA). However, the USFA needs to update the NFIRS to improve the accuracy and timeliness of the data. Inadequate resources are provided at the federal and state level to accomplish this and to fully implement NFIRS within Colorado's fire departments.

It is important to note that the law enforcement equivalent of NFIRS is the FBI's National Incident-Based Reporting System. One advantage of the law enforcement reporting system is the funding provided by the Department of Justice for program implementation. Significant amounts have been distributed to state agencies responsible for crime data collection. Such funding is not available to support NFIRS implementation.

CONCLUSION

We all recognize the increased demands that have been placed on our nation's firefighters since September 11th. We can no longer ask our fire departments to survive entirely on local tax revenue, or in some cases fundraisers such as potluck dinners and auctions. The state and federal government must provide adequate resources and support to our firefighters to meet the many challenges – whether natural, unintentional or deliberate – as they protect the public and secure our homeland.

The fire service in Colorado stands ready to meet the challenges we face as first responders and must do so from an "All Hazards Response" operating mode every day. In representing the chief officers from throughout the State, the CSFCA can be counted on to be an active participant in the development and implementation of strategies regarding Homeland Security. We would encourage at both the state and federal level every effort continue to be put forth to insure effective communication and on-going dialogue is established where needed and maintained with local first responders.

Thank you again for the opportunity to address this summit. On behalf of Colorado's chief fire officers, I thank Governor Bill Ritter, Congressman Mark Udall, Congressman Ed Perlmutter, and Colorado Homeland Security Director Mason Whitney for their continued support of the fire service.

I will attempt to address any questions you may have at this time.

⁵ These figures were derived from National Fire Incident Reporting System (NFIRS) data for Colorado. It is important to note that not all Colorado fire departments participate in NFIRS, so actual totals are higher than reported.

⁶ Fire in the United States, Fourteenth Edition, U.S. Fire Administration, August 2007.