

Recommendations
for
Public Information Activities
for
WIPPTREX Exercises

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prepared for the

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WIPPTREX Public Information Program

Introduction

A WIPPTREX emergency response field exercise is a high-profile activity. When conducted as a comprehensive program, many people in the community will be involved. Those not participating directly in the exercise will undoubtedly become aware of the exercise and associated activities. Preparing for, and conducting an exercise provides many opportunities for public information messages. Targeted audiences can include elected and appointed officials, media representatives, and the general public. Messages can inform the public about the exercise itself, the safe transportation program in general, and the WIPP project.

This paper describes the possible components of a public information plan for a WIPPTREX exercise program. The recommended plan is derived from the experience gained through conducting WIPPTREX exercises. A WIPPTREX exercise should not be considered as a single exercise, but rather as a comprehensive exercise program. As described here, this exercise program includes training classes, a tabletop exercise, a drill, and the final exercise. Both the drill and the exercise are full-scale field exercises with similar scenarios involving all the exercise participants. The drill is not evaluated and is conducted as a learning experience for the participants. The exercise is evaluated.

Informing and Involving Local Public Officials

Support by local elected and appointed officials is key to the completion of a successful exercise program. Preparation for an exercise requires a significant time commitment from local first response agencies. If local officials understand the importance and scope of the exercise program from the outset, they will usually be willing to commit the necessary resources for an exercise program.

The first step in building this support should be a formal request to participate in the exercise program. This request should be directed to the Mayor of the community and the County Commissioners where the exercise will be conducted. It is best if the request is on a peer-to-peer basis. For example, a letter from the Governor to the Mayor and County Commissioners requesting the local jurisdictions' participation in the exercise program is usually most effective. Depending upon the community, local officials that should be contacted early in the planning may also include state legislators, tribal government officials, and members of Congress.

A briefing should then be provided to the local elected officials to inform them about the exercise program. The briefing can include the following items:

- Favorable comments from participants of past exercises,
- History of the exercise program,
- Purpose and scope,
- Planning procedures,
- Planned activities and tentative schedule,
- Summary of training to be provided, and
- Description of funding.

Observers are usually invited to the exercise. They may include representatives from other states and Department of Energy Officials. Public safety officials from nearby communities can also be invited so they have an opportunity to improve their capabilities through observing the exercise. An observer briefing will usually be held prior to the exercise. Safety briefings are required before an exercise. Local elected officials should be invited to attend these briefings. The Mayor or other appropriate official can be requested to provide an official welcome to the community if many observers from outside the area are expected.

Elected officials should be invited to participate in the actual exercise. It is most effective if elected officials "play" their actual role in an incident. The participation can be as simple as a call to the incident commander to see how things are progressing, or as complex as total involvement as outlined in the jurisdiction's emergency operations plan.

The exercise program usually focuses attention in the community on the WIPP project. This is an ideal time to arrange a visit to the WIPP site for elected and appointed officials. Through a site visit, officials can gain a better understanding of the entire WIPP project, instead of just the transportation through their community. A site visit should include a visit to the Central Monitoring Room.

Media Representatives

Representatives of the media, including television, radio, newspapers, and relevant trade publications, should be involved early and often in a WIPPTREX program. Local media representatives are usually interested in potential articles and photo opportunities involving public safety. An exercise program provides many of these opportunities, making it easy to interest local media representatives.

State and local public information officers should be used as much as possible when working with local media. Public information officers already know local reporters, and what interests them. The use of public information officers will also help ensure consistency in the messages and information provided.

In some smaller communities, however, local public information officers may not exist. In this case, local governments should be encouraged to appoint an individual to serve as the local public information officer for the exercise. The WIPPTREX program provides an opportunity to provide training for the new public information officer. The public information officer will be a valuable asset to public safety officials during hazardous materials incidents in the future.

Invite media representatives to attend briefings, training classes, and tabletop exercises. Through this contact, they are provided with a potential article and photo opportunity. They also will learn more about the WIPP facility, the WIPP transportation safety program, and the workings of their local public safety agencies.

A formal media briefing should be held prior to the full-scale drill. The drill will result in a lot of radio communications and public safety vehicle movements. Therefore, local media representatives should be well informed about the upcoming activities.

For most exercises, the TRUPACT transport vehicle, Department of Energy Radiological Assistance Program equipment, and state radiological response equipment will arrive in the area a day or two before the drill. This provides an excellent opportunity to conclude a formal briefing with a demonstration of the equipment available to responders and of the safety features included in the TRUPACT transport vehicle. State, Department of Energy, and local public information officers and the TRUPACT transport vehicle drivers should be available to respond to any questions or requests for additional information.

Local media representatives can be invited to "play" their role in the exercise. By "covering" the "incident," they can be made to feel a part of the story as it develops. Make sure they have the opportunity to interview key officials, exercise participants, and the exercise coordinator. Also make sure they are aware of activities at areas other than just the exercise site, such as the local hospital or the local dispatch center. If local media representatives do agree to participate, exercise controllers should recognize the media representative's time constraints, and should be prepared to allow the media representatives to drop out of play to cover other aspects of the exercise or other stories.

If a visit to the WIPP site is planned as part of the WIPPTREX program, local media representatives can be invited on the tour. Make sure that the Department of Energy public information officers at the WIPP site know that local media representatives will be attending the tour.

Informing the Public

Providing information to the public on the exercise program will flow naturally out of many of the above activities. Formal press releases should be prepared before the drill and exercise to make sure that the public is aware of the upcoming drill or exercise.

The WIPP road show vehicle can be requested in conjunction with the formal media briefing discussed above. Both the WIPP transport vehicle and emergency response equipment can be used for public information displays set up in a prominent area in the community. Prior to the drill or exercise, the exercise coordinator or public information officers can participate in local radio talk shows.

At the conclusion of the exercise, a formal press release should be issued. A draft of the press release should be prepared and submitted to the WIPPTREX exercise participants for their review before issuance of the final release. This will ensure that no one is surprised and that the right message is relayed to the public. The press release should note the successful completion of the exercise by local agencies. If available, favorable comments from local public safety officials can be included to inform the public that the community is now better prepared. The press release can also include a thank you for their participation to local responders from a key State official.