

# A New Game Plan for Disasters

*The National Response Plan has implications for states*

By Amy C. Hughes

**T**he threat of terrorism has created a new playing field in how the nation responds to disasters—some say an uneven one. Many people in the field of emergency management and homeland security believe that in order to best handle a variety of critical disasters like Hurricane Lili, the Oklahoma City bombing and the Sept. 11 attacks, they need a new game plan. Beginning in 2005, state and local governments will be required to adopt one.

The *National Strategy for Homeland Security*, released in 2002, charged the Department of Homeland Security with developing a single, comprehensive national approach for responding to disasters. The plan must be adaptable to the wide range of potential man-made and natural hazards and be encompassing enough to integrate all emergency response disciplines.

This was a tall order, considering it must be implemented from the top levels of the federal government to the street-level emergency responder. In some cases the plan would have to cut through the traditional theories of disaster management and integrate disparate plans, principles and doctrines. It would also have to accommodate the wide range of threats that have entered the national lexicon—bioterrorism, agroterrorism, weapons of mass destruction, etc.

DHS developed the National Response Plan to guide the actions of federal, state and local agencies when they respond to a disaster of significant magnitude. The NRP builds on concepts from the Federal Response Plan—the nation's first standardized disaster plan, which was conceived from the 1988 Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act—and other established federal agency plans. It supersedes the Initial National Response Plan, which has been in effect since October 2003, as well as the FRP and other hazard-specific response plans.

*Photos courtesy of the Federal Emergency Management Agency*



State, local and tribal jurisdictions are expected to adhere to the NRP when the response to a disaster requires the assistance of the federal government, and they have been asked to align their state plans accordingly. A review team of state and local emergency response representatives was convened during the drafting of the plan to ensure that the drafters considered the perspectives of stakeholder organizations. Compromises were made to preserve some of the best features of other national plans, including salvaging some of the traditional terminology and the tried-and-true concepts of the FRP that were most familiar to state and local emergency responders.

For state and local government officials, integrating the NRP into their state operations poses some challenges. States will need to consider how implementing the plan will affect their emergency response operations, what changes should be made to their emergency operations plans, and what adjustments state agencies and local governments must make to function in this new environment.

### The Basic Plan

The NRP identifies four principal areas of focus in disaster management: prevention, preparedness, response and recovery. Each of these incorporates the activities of emergency responders throughout the life cycle of a disaster. The plan also outlines specific roles for federal agencies in disaster response and introduces new coordination and management structures—along with a flurry of new acronyms—with which states and local jurisdictions must become familiar, including the following:

- *Principal Federal Official.* An important role established under the Initial NRP in 2003, the PFO is considered the single federal authority when the federal government is called upon to assist in the response to a disaster. The PFO has wide-ranging authority to mobilize resources, determine the appropriate course of action in a given situation,

and make federal policy recommendations as needed to adapt the response to the emergency. By default, the secretary of DHS is designated as the PFO, unless the situation calls for another federal agency representative to serve in this lead role. The PFO will serve as the federal liaison to the top ranking officials of affected jurisdictions. For states, the presidential declaration process will remain the same as outlined in the Stafford Act.

- *Joint Field Office.* When activated in response to a disaster, the Joint Field Office will be the new hub of coordination near the incident scene and will combine the activities of federal, state and local law enforcement and emergency management into one location. This replaces the Disaster Field Office commonly used by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, but does not in any way replace the state Emergency Operations Center, which remains the central coordinating facility for state operations.
- *Homeland Security Operations Center.* In early July, DHS established the HSOC as the “nerve center” for information sharing and incident management for the nation. The center is currently up and running at DHS and FEMA. It combines intelligence and law enforcement entities under one roof to assist the department in identifying, preventing and responding to threats of terrorist attacks and notifying designated state and local homeland security agencies.
- *Interagency Incident Management Group.* Under the NRP, the IIMG will serve as a sort of “Joint Chiefs” during a catastrophic event and will direct federal disaster operations from the HSOC. Representatives from federal agencies and nongovernmental organizations involved in the disaster response will convene to advise the PFO on what actions should take place and what resources are available.

The NRP is set into motion when an event is declared an “incident of national significance.” According to the plan, this can include credible threats, indications or acts of terrorism within the United States; major disasters or emergencies as identified through the Stafford Act; catastrophic incidents; or any unique situation that may require coordination with the Department of Homeland Security, such as high-profile, large-scale events that may be considered targets for terrorism.

The national political conventions, the G-8 Summit, and major sporting events such as the Olympics and the Super Bowl are classified as “National Special Security Events.” Because of their size and complexity, the unique security needs of the proceedings and attendees, and their symbolism to the nation, these events require extensive coordination among federal, state and local officials. During such events, the NRP provides the protocols for the involvement of DHS and other federal agencies.

As with the Federal Response Plan, the NRP is comprised of a basic framework and several supplemental documents that detail the roles and responsibilities of specific federal agencies.

The Emergency Support Functions categorize disaster assistance by functional areas. Compared to the FRP, nearly every function has been altered to modernize and better define the scope of responsibility. Three new functions have been added to recognize

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### Internet Resources

- Department of Homeland Security  
[www.dhs.gov](http://www.dhs.gov) (keywords: NRP, NIMS)
- National Strategy for Homeland Security  
[www.whitehouse.gov/homeland](http://www.whitehouse.gov/homeland)
- Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act  
[www.fema.gov/library/stafact.shtm](http://www.fema.gov/library/stafact.shtm)
- National Emergency Management Association  
[www.nemaweb.org](http://www.nemaweb.org)

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the important roles of law enforcement, economic recovery and public information and warning in a disaster (see “Components of the National Response Plan”).

While it may appear that the changes are mere semantics, the federal ESF system is at the core of each state’s disaster planning and operations. Any changes to the ESF structure must be instituted on the state and local level to establish a clear division of responsibility and to ensure the seamless coordination of resources and personnel across all disciplines and at each level of government.

The Incident Annexes describe the mission, policies and responsibilities related to incidents that present unique challenges and therefore require a specialized response, such as cyber or biological terrorism. They delineate which federal agencies will have primary responsibility for the incident, what priorities are considered above others, and what specific actions will be taken to respond to the situation.

## States Must Adapt

State public safety agencies must integrate the NRP into their operations and exercises, train their personnel, modify their state emergency operations plans, and in some cases alter state laws to accommodate the new policies and language—all of which take money, manpower and time.

“We see the NRP as an extension of our state emergency operations plan,” said Jamie Turner, director of the Delaware Emergency Management Agency. “Our staff will need to be trained. Exercises will be conducted to ensure it is fully integrated into our operations. But the biggest issue for us is time, considering all of the state’s other responsibilities in homeland security.”

Given the tight timeframes set forth by DHS to have the NRP integrated into federal, state and local operations, time is of the essence. According to the department, the plan will go into effect 90 days after it is approved by DHS Secretary Tom Ridge’s top homeland security advisory council in early August.

DHS will implement a national training and evaluation system to train federal personnel on the new procedures. Assessments will be conducted and adjustments made to the plan within the first year and then every four years thereafter. State and local governments are asked to integrate the new procedures into their systems by early 2005.

A standardized NRP implementation and training program for state and local personnel has not been identified, however, raising concern that a consistent application of the NRP may not be achieved to the degree that DHS officials expect.

“We recognize the need for a standardized, national framework for disaster response,” said Mike Sherberger, emergency management director for the state of Georgia. “Our job at the state level is to make it fit into Georgia’s system. Certainly there will need to be some refinement to the plan as it is tested.”

In contrast to the FRP and despite efforts to retain its emphasis on operational policy, mitigation was not retained as a major theme in the plan. “Mitigation” includes activities taken to reduce the effects of a disaster on property and lives. Mitigation programs, such as property buyouts, flood zone relocation and fire prevention, are important to many states and remain one of the best ways to lessen the impact and cost of future disasters.

The loss of mitigation as a key concept in the overall plan reflects the shift in federal government policy away from funding and programs for loss prevention. While the NRP does outline mitigation activities as an annex, the emphasis on mitigation programs as a pre-disaster and post-disaster priority appears to be lessened.

Overall, while the NRP is intended to guide the federal response to all hazards, it focuses heavily on the prevention of, response to and recovery from terrorist incidents. Although this serves to prepare the national emergency response system for a new reality that seemed unlikely a few years ago, the ongoing concern for states is that federal resources may be diverted away from programs that have traditionally been used to support the response to natural hazards, which still pose significant risks. However, the inclusion of state and local organizations in the plan’s development process is a promising sign that the NRP is truly a national effort.

“To us, this is the next evolution of disaster management. It recognizes the dynamic nature of terrorism but respects the concepts of a successful system currently in place to manage natural disasters,” said Sherberger.

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## Components of the National Response Plan

### Emergency Support Functions

- Transportation
- Public Works and Engineering
- Emergency Management (expanded)
- Resource Support
- Urban Search and Rescue
- Agriculture and Natural Resources (expanded)
- Public Safety and Security (new)
- Emergency Public Information and External Communications (new)
- Telecommunications and Information Technology (expanded)
- Firefighting
- Mass Care, Housing and Human Services (expanded)
- Public Health and Medical Services (expanded)
- Oil and Hazardous Materials Response (expanded)
- Energy
- Community Recovery, Mitigation, and Economic Stabilization (new)

### Incident Annexes

- Biological Response Incident
- Catastrophic Incident
- Cyber Incident
- Nuclear/Radiological Incident
- Oil and Hazardous Materials Incident
- Law Enforcement Investigative Response to a Terrorist Threat or Incident

### Support Annexes

- Financial Management
- Insular Areas
- International Coordination
- Logistics Management
- Private Sector
- Public Affairs
- Science and Technology
- Tribal Relations
- Volunteer and Donations Management
- Worker Safety and Health