

The long way home

Officials of the National Emergency Management Association were holding their annual conference in Big Sky, Mont., the day of the attacks in New York and Washington, D.C. Here is their account.

BY EMILY DeMERS

When hijackers guided planes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on Sept. 11, people throughout the country felt shock, fear and outrage. In a small town in Montana, those reactions combined with frustration for hundreds of state emergency management officials.

Emergency management directors and staff from 47 states and territories were gathered that day in Big Sky, Mont., for the annual conference of the National Emergency Management Association, which was to have run from Friday, Sept. 7, to Wednesday, Sept. 12. NEMA officials had gone to Montana, home of the association's then-president, Jim Greene, to hear briefings on the latest issues in domestic preparedness, improve state and local capabilities, address energy shortages, and discuss lessons from the February 2001 Nisqually Earthquake.

Joining state emergency managers at the meeting were people from numerous federal agencies, including Joe Allbaugh, director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Just the day before, Allbaugh had addressed NEMA for the first time, noting his focus on improving capabilities and preparing for disaster. At 9 a.m. Tuesday, attendees were to participate in a series of sessions on domestic preparedness, a key topic for NEMA for the past three years. But when Tuesday morning rolled around, emergency managers were not where they wanted to be.

As soon as news of the terrorist attacks aired, emergency managers, federal personnel and private-sector mem-

bers sprang into action, coordinating their jurisdictions' responses from Montana. Much as they do in other disaster situations, emergency managers set up a 24-hour emergency operations center and

Although these managers knew their staffs were capable and plans had been established, they were concerned that they would not be able to get home after air traffic was halted following the attacks.



Frank Koutnik, left, of the Florida Division of Emergency Management, Trina Hembree, executive director of NEMA, and John Ogren of the National Weather Service checked transportation options at the close of the NEMA conference.

organized teams to address specific areas, including information and planning, transportation and medical needs. They established communications with disaster officials throughout the country to expedite transportation for those from affected states. The Gallatin County Sheriff's Department, Big Sky Volunteer Fire Department, Montana Highway Patrol, Montana National Guard and the FBI provided security. Hotel staff added phone lines and equipment to enable tracking of events and communication.

Through it all, emergency managers and others were professional and focused despite the harried situation. They monitored events and stayed in contact with their agencies by telephone, and they attended briefings about the national situation as well as participated in on-site activities.

Special arrangements were made for some. Edward Jacoby, director of the New York State Emergency Management Office, returned to Albany aboard an F-16 in a flight arranged by the Montana National Guard. Allbaugh and several key FEMA staff members traveled home on another plane. More than 40 emergency management officials and federal staff from Eastern states – including Virginia and Washington, D.C. – waited for more than seven hours at the Bozeman airport as others at the conference site worked to get clearance from the Federal Aviation Administration for an Air Force C-17 to fly them back.

Many of those not on emergency military flights had to drive several hundred, or in some cases, several thousand miles to get back to their states. Given the uncertainty about when commercial air service would resume, they opted to take the long way home. They communicated with their agencies by cell phone, often stopping to use landlines for greater security, as they crossed mountains, plains and rivers in an American landscape that suddenly felt changed. ★

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