

Coastside Emergency Corps

Winter Storm Exercise Sept. 26, 2015

After-Action Report (AAR) Prepared by Nick Gottuso



This winter storm season has the potential to result in rainfall amounts well above normal, high winds, and all the associated weather-related problems that go with it. In order to better prepare the Coastside and its residents for this possibility, the Coastside Emergency Corps (CEC) held a Winter Storm exercise on Saturday, September 26, 2015.

One of the main goals of any preparedness exercise is to build personal relationships between volunteers, Law Enforcement, Public Works, Fire, Red Cross, Human Services, ham radio groups, Large Animal Evacuation Group, and any others who may find themselves working together in an emergency. For this exercise, 86 participants got together for an important day of training and relationship-building.

Participants from Branches I and II met at the CEOC for breakfast and briefing at 0800. Branch III members met at Pescadero High School and joined the briefing by conference call and radio. At 0830, Branch I and II shelter teams and field teams were formed, and by 0845, teams departed the CEOC for their assigned locations. Shelters were activated at Farralone View School (Branch I,) Half Moon Bay HS (Branch II) and Pescadero HS (Branch III.) Each Branch deployed a field team to handle evacuations, damage assessment reports, mudslides, power lines and trees down, and other injects. Each Shelter had a ham radio operator, as did each Field Team. The CEOC was activated to support incidents in the field, and ham radio communications was established between all locations and teams, in some cases with the assistance of relays. The Operational Area EOC in Redwood City was activated to support the CEOC.

The Large Animal Evacuation Group was roaming the Coastside handling injects, and the Peninsula Humane Society volunteers inventoried the PHS emergency trailer (after gaining access to the yard where it was stored.) Discovering that the locks had been changed was a very valuable finding, and exactly the kind of thing we want to sort out during an exercise and not during a real emergency.

As is always the case in any exercise, we analyze the event, looking for things that went well, things that did not, and ways to improve for the next exercise (or the real thing.)

Many participants completed an evaluation form, and quite a few people also sent me e-mails with more detailed observations and suggestions. This AAR is a compilation and consolidation of everyone's input. The following questions appeared on the evaluation form (not every participant answered every question.) Answers to the second part of any two-part questions will be listed as "Notes" at the end of each question, or in the Observations and Suggestions section. Condensed answers are shown below.

There will be a separate, more technical ham radio-specific AAR that I will share with known hams who participated. If you would like a copy of that when it's finished, please let me know.

1. Were the pre-event e-mail instructions helpful? If not, how could they have been improved?

30 said YES

1 said NO

4 said SOMEWHAT

7 said NOT RECEIVED (A few participants did not join the CEC until after these e-mails were sent)

2 said NOT ENOUGH INFO

2 said TOO MUCH INFO for a simulated emergency

Notes: During a real emergency, responders (both professional and volunteer) will have very little information to go on when activated. They will have to make decisions and take action with whatever info and experience they have, which will always be less than what we provided for this exercise. It is unrealistic to spell out every detail in advance, since that is not how it works in real life. Working with what you have is an important element of these exercises.

2. Was the briefing informative? Did it answer all questions about the operation?

27 said YES

2 said NO

6 said SOMEWHAT

4 said IT WASN'T SUPPOSED TO

Notes: The 4 participants who said the briefing was not supposed to answer all questions are referring to the same views expressed in the notes from Question 1.

3. How would you rate the quality and quantity of food provided?

39 said GOOD (Other answers in this category included VERY GOOD, DELICIOUS, EXCELLENT, GREAT, TOP RATE, AWESOME, OK, FINE and SUFFICIENT)

0 said BAD or another negative rating

3 said NEEDED MORE COFFEE

Notes: These are much better ratings than we received at the last exercise, so it looks like lessons were learned and action was taken to help fix the problem. Also, I thought the 5-gallon can full of coffee would be enough; I won't make that mistake again.

4. Was your team able to communicate with the CEOC? How could this be improved?

21 said YES

2 said NO

9 said GOOD AFTER FIXING INITIAL INEFFICIENCY/BOTTLENECK

Notes: Just like during a real emergency, communications is always an issue that starts out being bumpy until things get sorted out, and this is exactly what happened in our exercise. It was quite realistic in that sense. The ham-specific AAR will address the actions that need to be taken from an equipment and training standpoint to improve communications.

5. Do you feel this was a valuable exercise for the CEC?

41 said YES

0 said NO

1 said I DON'T KNOW

Notes: It is gratifying that every participant who completed an evaluation agreed that the exercise WAS valuable for the Coastside Emergency Corps (except the person who said "I don't know.")

6. Any other observations or suggestions? (At least two people saying the same thing)

7 said MORE EXERCISES would be great

5 said HAMS NEED MORE TRAINING AND EQUIPMENT (Addressed in detail in Ham-specific AAR)

2 said SHELTER WORKERS NEEDED MORE INJECTS, INJECT USE SHOULD BE BETTER EXPLAINED

2 said FIELD TEAMS AND SHELTER TEAMS NEEDED DESIGNATED LEADERS

Notes: The confusion over how/when/if to use the printed injects was the result of a breakdown of communications and clarity on my part. It will be addressed before the next exercise.

The remaining non-ham related Observations and Suggestions, some of which may be looked into as action items, are synopsized below from individuals' comments (one person per comment):

Victims coming into shelters should activate the GPS function in their phones to assist being located by loved ones.

Clarification needed on Team Assignments.

We need a Red Cross Liaison person in the Shelter Branch of CEOC.

Tarps needed for floor of shelters.

Some need review of ICS.

Shelters need signage and basic registration forms.

Farralone View School needs generator, emergency lights, and portable heaters.

We should conduct neighborhood surveys to identify problems and needs.

HMB Shelter was not told to open injects; down time used to discuss shelter issues.

We wish we had an organized MRC.

Need a mechanism to round up lapsed CERT trainees to join CEC.

Need more locations and longer run-time for exercises so people can rotate through multiple assignments.

Paperwork being used could be better explained in advance.

Maybe we can use the ICS-205 form for our roster.

Address Pescadero HS phone problems.

Providing food was a logistical task that wasn't necessary (this person's identity is being withheld to protect them.)

Morning briefing was confusing, not clear how injects would be used.

All documents used in exercise should be PDFs. Docs should be reviewed in more detail before event.

Each community should work on local block plans, decide who manages things, get nurses onboard, plan better for farm animals and pets.

Shelter teams need clearer expectations explained to them.

Shelter Trailer, PHS trailer need to be moved to HMB HS to solve a multitude of problems.

Need more PHS volunteers.

PHS trailer needs internal tie-down straps.

Pelican Point, Pillar Point and Canada Cove trailer parks need generators.

Pescadero HS shelter was not secured (broken lock on rear door)

We were very fortunate to have Mr. Bill Wilkinson in the CEOC to provide a professional evaluation of the exercise. Bill is a contractor for OES, and he has vast experience as an officer in the military as well as in managing the EOC at SFO. Here is his report:

DEBRIEFING NOTES
COASTSIDE EOC/OES FIELD AND SHELTER EXERCISE
SATURDAY, 26 SEPTEMBER 2015

0810 In-briefing Nick Gottuso

Real weather: overcast, cool with patchy fog.

Play weather: Rain, high winds.

Today's objectives are: 1) Safety; 2) Building relationships and cell numbers list; 3) Practicing the C-EOC; 4) Shelter Operations; 5) Radio communications; 6) Practice three field teams with HAMS in a storm exercise scenario.

Steps: Disperse participants to field points; open the C-EOC partially to support field operations; simulate patient transport through on-site teams but with HAM support.

0820 Brian briefed on HAM circuits and set up

0820 Gottuso noted teams should keep notes especially on ICS 214 with debriefing notes; described HazMat going on with Half Moon Bay city separately; please send in your suggestions.

0830 Break out to organize 3 teams; all personnel appeared actively engaged with Gottuso herding. Players picking up ICS forms and prepared packets of information for each team (later discovered that Team 1 did not pick up theirs due to an unidentified misunderstanding).

0845 Teams departing; EOC being minimally set up. One team of 8 paused on the porch to do team briefing and departed to "the Yard" at 0850 by vehicles.

0853 Inside C-EOC all were engaged with introductions being done-handshakes, etc.; tables being moved in C-EOC; Operations and Logistics being set up with laptops; two persons present for technical help with the facility and laptops. Guttuso noted that Pescadero was late in establishing communication and did not hear the in-briefing; HAM radio is slow due to a bottleneck that is being resolved. Aside: the communication net was laid out for the exercise on ICS 205 plus branch documents to fill out assignments.

0930 Overhearing calls from field concerning slides and large animal control; reports of food support requested for a shelter being delayed due to debris slides and road closures on all branches.

0935 C-EOC received request for 500 sandbags (740-3646) from the field

0937 All personnel still engaged in communication and liaison and meetings.
Evaluator aside comment: licensed HAM members appear to be falling into ordinary and common speech qualities such as saying "Copy"; "Thank you"; and not using "Over", "Acknowledged", "Roger", station identifiers, et cetera in their transmission from and to the field.

0950 Visited Red Cross-Mallamo on updated Half Moon Bay vendor list (CEAP) a great logistics tool used by the ARC.

0955 Fire Department liaised with SMC on sand bags and sand bag filling by a soft ball team and that three family members named Jones were located.

1005 CHP-Sharma and FD-Delay observed in discussion of power line geometries (and how they can be) affected by weather and physical environment of the transmission lines); i.e. "what if"...

At the Command desk: discussion by Mattei and others on what is real world current status and work practices on a daily basis (loaded trucks)

Messenger arrives: with message about a man at shelter with a gun who will not leave.

Discussion continues: with war stories and lessons learned about stop signs, jurisdictions, etc.

1017 Continuing to see players engaged and discussing stuff around all points of the room.

1026 Guttuso reported one field unit has not had traffic to this point-Fire Department OIC said to send them an order for 10,000 sand bags and trucks of sand by way of HAM (unit).

1028 War stories continue

1030 Liaising, discussions, story sharing continues with all engaged.

1050 Fire Department assistant-Fairbrother continues coordinating inject messages with Logistics-ARC.

1055 ENDEX broadcast to the field and rearrange EOC for debriefing and lunch.

1100 ENDEX- recall to the C-EOC.

Exercise evaluation begins on next page.

EVALUATION NOTES.

1. Were pre-event instructions helpful?
Not observed.
2. Was briefing informative?
Yes, seemed complete, one question from audience and Pescadero radio difficulties reported.
3. Rate the quality and quantity of food?
Not observed, except as noted later.
4. Was your team able to communicate with C-EOC?
Observed communications activity as noted above.
5. Do you feel that this was a valuable exercise for the CEC?
Yes.

6 Suggestions or observations (refer to six Objectives noted above) as reported to all players:

What went well:

Objectives 1 (Safety) and 2 (Build relationships) were met with all persons observed engaged in the exercise and accepted its parameters-lots of liaising and conversations observed as well as tech-talk and systems problems resolution. Tall tales told had value as lessons learned.

Objectives 3 (Practice EOC) and 5 (Radio operations) were met.

Objectives 4 (Shelters) and 6 (Field teams) were Not Observed.

What did not go well:

C-EOC ran out of coffee.

Suggestions for future:

Do more of these and everyone bring their friends.

NEXT STEPS:

We would appreciate it if each working Group could extract those items that are relevant to the work you did during the planning stages of the exercise and develop some strategies for addressing the problems. (Some of this has already occurred... Great job!) Please report back to me by November 2nd with your initial findings. Remember that while this was "just" an exercise, it is our intention to use the lessons learned to improve our real-world mitigation and response procedures during emergencies.

Once again, thank you all very much for your dedication, hard work and sacrifice to improve the safety of the Coastside and its residents. We are lucky to have you. I welcome your feedback on this AAR. Please keep up the great work!