



Southeast and Northeast Region After Action Report April 22, 2010 Severe Weather Events

Bent County

ISSUE: Utilizing Webeoc on fast-paced incidents in a rural setting.

DISCUSSION: National weather service had issued a variety of warnings and watches. As the emergency manager for Bent County, I was notified by dispatch that a tornado had been sighted south and east of Las Animas. Current available resources were 2 city police units, 1 court security deputy and myself.. Priorities are obvious with the limited resources at the time, while en route, I authorized the launching of CODERED (a telephone alert system that notified by cell, home and text). I coordinated with the City of Las Animas police units and received reports from them via radio. I directed the deputy on a path to a vantage point that along with me we could ascertain a vector of the tornado. Within minutes 3 other tornadoes are observed in a cluster near Ft Lyon Correctional Facility east of Las Animas on US Highway 50. I continued to coordinate the movements of the deputy and city police while keeping the communications center updated. I was travelling at times in excess of 100MPH while using 2 radio channels and constantly on the cell phone giving information and directions. We followed the storm for approximately 1 1/2 hours and added elements of 2 fire departments and another sheriff's officer to the activity. A technical problem made the CODERED system unavailable from dispatch and Chris Sorensen (Kiowa County Emergency Manager) was able to launch CODERED remotely -- a backup capacity that I appreciate and has become routine in the southeast Region. We continued without a moment to spare for any other activity other than to gather appropriate information to give detailed advance warning to the public and the neighboring county residents and the emergency manager, with tornadoes still on the ground entering Kiowa County. Kiowa County was dealing with a fatal car crash and these two counties utilize the same communications center which was over loaded from the onset of the first sighting. As the tornadoes left Bent County, and because of road conditions, we were unable to continue the chase. I then directed the deputies to find the path of the tornadoes and back track looking for victims and a preliminary damage assessment, which neither was determined. During this time, we dealt with media and continued to get important information out to the public. I also communicated with the National Weather Service, giving detailed information necessary to them.

RECOMMENDATION: As in other incidents in rural areas, the emergency managers often must go to the scene to help coordination and assist in the development of the incident action planning. I would recommend that webeoc is updated after the incident is complete. During this incident webeoc wasn't on my priority list. Updating webeoc wouldn't do anything for me under these circumstances. CDEM may want to know what is going on, but it that not important to me unless I need something from them. However, keeping the Field Manager verbally informed on the incident is doable via cell phone or radio traffic. We rely on the field managers for advice and operational support on these incidents.

Kiowa County

ISSUE: Utilizing Webeoc on fast-paced incidents in a rural setting.

DISCUSSION: Discussions with broadcast meteorologists Wednesday revealed that conditions the following afternoon would be favorable for funnels and tornados in Kiowa County, and possibly surrounding areas. The boundary defined was east of Highway 71 and north of Highway 50, with particular emphasis on the area between Haswell and Sheridan Lake in Kiowa County.

County EM briefed the Kiowa County Sheriff's Office staff at 08:00 Thursday morning about expectations for weather issues, and it was decided that SO staff would be the first weather spotters to be deployed if the forecast was accurate. SO office deputy reviewed the process for launching reverse telephone alerts as a backup for the EM Text notifications were sent to volunteer fire responders about the potential need for spotter activation and notices were posted via social media resources for members of the public. An entry was also made on the Kiowa County WebEOC board, but was not distributed regionally since the available information was in some cases broadly available from other sources or was specific to Kiowa County at that point. Further, it was not anticipated that outside resources – county-to-county or state mutual aid – would be needed for weather spotting activity.

Addition preparations included using NWChat to maintain direct contact with the Pueblo WFO, setting a radio to monitor the OEM SL talk group patch to NAWAS, and opening our radar monitoring display. Shortly after 12:00, there were indications that storms were starting on a path toward Kiowa County, but would affect areas south of the county first. At approximately 12:30, the Pueblo WFO issued a tornado watch. The on-duty SO staff (sheriff, undersheriff, sergeant and deputy) began to mobilize and the office deputy began notifying schools and medical facilities to prepare for sheltering. The National Park Service office was also notified to prepare to depopulate the Sand Creek Massacre Historic Site (a tornado shelter has been installed at the site recently, but capacity is limited, and the location would make post-incident S&R difficult). Soon after, we began hearing reports of a possible tornado in Bent County. Kiowa County shares a dispatch facility and LE talk group with Bent County. Activity picked up rapidly at this point.

The SO office deputy was directed to provide updated notifications to the schools, medical facilities, and some special needs residents living near the Bent-Kiowa border.

The Kiowa County EM office (total staffing: 1 FTE) monitored the activity in Bent County for situational awareness as the storms progressed toward Kiowa County, and to be ready to provide assistance to Bent County if needed. The office also was monitoring weather spotting reports from the SO staff. As activity increased, the SO office deputy was brought into the EM office to assist with monitoring and information distribution to local entities. At that point, the first of five tornado warnings for Kiowa County was issued. Bent County already had one or more warnings in place, and radio traffic on the shared LE talk group, Kiowa tactical talk group, and OEM SL had become near constant, and challenging to monitor.

Kiowa County launched the first reverse telephone alert to county residents for the tornado warning. As that warning was launched, Bent County Dispatch contacted the Kiowa County EM requesting assistance in launching a telephone alert for their warned areas since a technical issue was preventing them from launching their own notification.

As these activities were occurring, Bent County Dispatch notified KCSO, fire department and ambulance service about a two vehicle crash with injuries in north central Kiowa County. This crash was not weather-related, but was in the path of rain and hail, and potentially tornados. When the sheriff arrived on scene, he determined that there was a fatality and requested the coroner.

Activities over the next hour plus are a bit muddled – media calls started coming in from Colorado Springs and Denver TV stations while additional tornado warnings were occurring in Kiowa County. At least one additional reverse telephone alert was launched during this time covering areas in Bent and Kiowa Counties. The SO office deputy shifted between answering phone calls, monitoring the radio, and providing updates to the schools and medical facilities. Also during this time, the ambulance service director requested information regarding safe routes to transport a patient from Weisbrod Hospital in Eads to Memorial Hospital in Colorado Springs.

Reports of funnels and tornadoes increased, including a sighting of a tornado possibly moving toward Eads. The town public works director was located to set off outdoor warning sirens while a deputy tracked the progress of the tornado and relayed information.

Throughout the event, with the limits of time and personnel, priorities were set for which communications tools would be used. Life safety, as always, is the first priority, so reverse telephone alerts, radio traffic updates, and broadcast media contacts were given the highest priority. To a substantially lesser extent, NWSChat was used to pass information, however the Pueblo WFO was monitoring our reports over broadcast media and would have made more direct contact if the saw gaps in what was being disseminated. While use of WebEOC and social media tools may have been somewhat beneficial, during this incident and the multiple complexities, it was not possible to use these tools.

RECOMMENDATION: WebEOC is a great tool, but like any tool, it is not appropriate for all tasks or at all times. For slow moving events, or a fast moving event with more staff support, it would be possible to make regular status updates in WebEOC.

For a fast moving event, with multiple but manageable complexities, but which does not require mutual aid (such as yesterday's events), WebEOC will likely fall to a lower priority until a need for mutual aid is anticipated.

One of things noted during a local hot wash following the storms was the need to identify at least one courthouse staff member (non-EM or LE) to do basic radio monitoring to scribe information, such as weather spotter reports, and make basic entries in to WebEOC. The need for an additional person in this capacity is rare, but high-value when the need does arise. This would allow the EM and office deputy to more effectively focus on life safety and coordination activities while ensuring details are captured and helping expand situation awareness beyond the immediate area even if additional resources or mutual aid are not required.

In many cases, the emergency managers in Baca, Bent and Kiowa Counties have acted as mutual backup for events, including making WebEOC postings on behalf of their colleagues. For Thursday's storm system, the Baca County EM was out of the area for training, and the events affected Bent and Kiowa simultaneously, so the customary backup was not possible. The additional "special circumstances" person described in the previous paragraph would provide additional redundancy.

Kiowa County is not alone in struggling with limited staffing issues, so balancing the use of different tools at different points during an event or incident are likely to continue. I would suggest that, if it is known that a major event is occurring, and there are no entries in WebEOC, time resources at the local level have been stretched, but no additional aid is required. At such a point, the CDEM RFM may be able to act as a liaison to confirm the situation is being handled locally and that updates will be made when time allows or if there is a substantial change in circumstances.

I believe both Randy Freed and I had contact with Chad Ray as events unfolded. While this contact was limited due to the time constraints at the local level, it was sufficient for us to let him know that we were able to effectively handle the situation at the time, and for him to reaffirm to us that he was available if state resource requests became necessary.

The limited use of WebEOC yesterday should not be interpreted as a failure of that tool, or a failure of the local response, but does reflect local prioritization to effectively address identified needs for that particular set of circumstances. Use of WebEOC at that time would have been a hindrance rather than helpful.

Cheyenne & Kit Carson County

ISSUE: Clear procedures for notification and communication during severe weather.

DISCUSSION: During the weather events last week, I noted gaps in the communications, and dissemination of pertinent information from the local and State level. I have addressed this issue before, and have been told that during a severe weather event, local law enforcement and other responders and dispatch are really too busy to call non-emergent responders in a timely manner. They are busy dealing with phones, call down lists for safety notifications, and radios, as they should be. It is my policy and procedure to monitor radio traffic to follow the developments in my jurisdiction to stay informed without being burdensome to dispatch. I then try to keep up with the WEBEOC notifications to the Region and the State. At times this task will be delayed, as during the high wind, or heavy precipitation events, most technology like the internet, or satellite communications are compromised. The local process is very time consuming, and adding WEBEOC is just another step. Most of the weather information is already being monitored by the State, so what I send is redundant. As for the local process, if open a shelter or stand up my EOC, will be due to an event that requires that action and will be reported to WEBEOC as soon as possible, but immediately passed along to the Regional EM by radio communications.. Most of these Spring Storm events are daily occurrences, and part of our routine for the day. Planning begins very early in the day, by monitoring the NWS, and other sources like DTN for weather information. Most agencies share this information early on before any weather event happens. Trained weather spotters are always on alert status. To say the least by the time weather develops, the entire area is on heightened alert. The priority is the safety and notification of the residents in the jurisdiction, and those traveling through it.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Maintain radio communication with Regional EM to pass along pertinent information as it becomes available.
- Use WEBEOC if it is available and if time permits.
- Provide a report for the daily activities to the Regional EM if a storm is strong enough to generate response activity; (spotters, siren, and reverse 911 notifications, shelter activation, or minor damage.)
- Disaster events like a direct hit of a tornado or a flooding event in a town, will be reported as soon as possible, and a record of request for resources will be noted on WEBEOC. Regional EM will be notified immediately by radio communications..
- Develop a report document on WEBEOC to log events that required a response but were more routine in nature. This report should be completed by the local EM at least 48 hrs. post event.
- The priority should be on local communications and dissemination of information to the residents, and travelers in the affected jurisdiction.

Morgan County

ISSUE: Utilizing WEBEOC on fast-paced incidents in a rural setting.

DISCUSSION: Morgan County OEM believes that the WEBEOC is a valuable tool and an excellent means of communication with other neighboring counties, the field manager and state. During the past storms watches and warnings when issued by the National Weather Service in Boulder. The emergency manager is scrambling to get emergency notification out to the public, utilizing Ever bridge to inform them by cell phone, regular phone, text messaging in the affected area.. Once the alert goes out the Emergency manager responds to the latest report on where the funnel cloud or the tornado that was sighted, and is the coordinator for all the responders, law enforcement, Volunteer Fire Departments to gather appropriate information to pass onto dispatch, media, NWS. Traveling down county roads and trying to triangle late the exact location of the tornado and the path it's taking, talking to the responders on the radio, calling the field manager on the cell, watching the radar on the laptop, WEBEOC is not a priority to the Emergency Manager, the most important mission is life safety and to protect property.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Use WEBEOC if time permits,
- The field Manager is an important asset to the local emergency managers for advise and support
- Once the incident has slowed down than a report can be generated.
- In the rural area the emergency manager goes to the scene to assist in planning and coordination