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ICS and ESF: An Unhappy Marriage?

Integrating the two can be a challenge

Over the past few years many jurisdictions have adopted the Federal Government's Emergency Support Function (ESF) format in the development of emergency operations plans in an attempt to mirror the National Response Framework. At the same time the National Incident Management System (NIMS) requires the use of the Incident Command System (ICS). However, there is no guidance as to how to integrate these two systems in the emergency operations center. [i]

This gives rise to a number of questions. The first is whether or not the two systems should be integrated. Secondly, if they are not compatible, which system provides the best value to the EOC? The answers to these questions my surprise you.

Historical Perspective

The ESF concept was initially developed as a local plan by FEMA Region IX to coordinate the activities of Federal agencies during a catastrophic disaster. The original intent was to assign responsibility for critical tasks to primary agencies and to provide the authority for them to task supporting agencies as necessary. Agencies were expected to operate independently upon activation. In other words, the ESFs were *never intended to operate from an EOC*.

This regional plan was later adopted as a national plan, *Plan for Federal Response to a Catastrophic Earthquake,* eventually evolving into the *Federal Response Plan*. As part of this evolution, the concept of independent action was replaced by the Emergency Support Team comprised of the ESFs operating out of the Federal Disaster Field Office (DFO) under the direction of the Federal Coordinating Officer.

The history of ICS is well known. It grew out of a need to coordinate tactical operations involving multiple agencies responding to large wildfires in California. However, what is frequently overlooked is that ICS was originally developed as a tactical level system intended for use in the field. The development of an operational component, the Multi-Agency Coordination System (MACS), was a later development. ICS, like the ESF concept, was *not intended for use in an EOC*.

Following Hurricanes Andrew and Iniki, a small group within FEMA began

pushing for the adoption of ICS within FEMA. As part of this process, there were several attempts to integrate the ESF concept with the ICS field structure. This integration yielded mixed results because of confusion over the roles of the ESFs. A number of ESFs were placed in the Logistics Section based on ICS roles without acknowledging their operational role. For example, ESF 1 Transportation not only provides transportation assets, it also has responsibility for restoration of transportation systems and infrastructure.

Is There Really a Difference?

In crafting the Regional earthquake plan, FEMA Region IX was responding to a specific risk, in essence creating a hazard specific plan. However, the plan was consistent with the functional planning approach that is at the core of multi-hazard planning. In essence, there is very little difference between an ESF annex and a functional annex:

- Both assign responsibility to lead agency[ii] for the planning and execution of critical response functions.
- Both identify supporting agencies that can be called upon by the lead agency.
- Both identify authorities for implementing the annex.

The real issue here is not the concepts. While we have no real empirical evidence that either the ESFs or ICS works as a disaster coordination mechanism, we have considerable anecdotal evidence of their effectiveness. Where many planners run into trouble is in overcommitting to structure rather than concepts.

As I have noted in many previous articles, the strength of ICS is in its principles, not its structure. In actual practice, the common ICS field structure is applied differently in each EOC and rarely resembles textbook diagrams. The same holds true in Federal field offices: ESFs are not fully staffed as they are on paper. In both cases what you typically get is an agency representative or representatives who act as both the primary agency for their assigned functions and as a supporting agency to other lead agencies.

Rethinking the EOC

If we toss out structure and focus on concepts, the planning process becomes much easier.

- Commitment to functional planning is the key. Whether you use straight ICS or the ESF concept really is a matter of semantics so long as you use a functional approach.
- No matter what format you use, apply ICS principles. Principles such as management by objectives, unity command, and common terminology are highly effective in any environment, especially the EOC.
- If you elect to use the ESF concept, remember that the ESF role is not the same as ICS functions with similar names; ESFs properly belong in the Operations Section.
- If you use straight ICS, stick with branch and unit designations and forget ESFs.

For too long planners have been trying to fit two systems designed for specific purposes into the EOC. It's time to stop making this so complicated.

[i] The draft NIMS Refresh mandates the use of ESFs in the Strategic Operations Section under the proposed Crisis Management System.

[ii] CPG 101 provides for multiple lead agencies led by a coordinating agency. This can cause problems and may violate the ICS principle of Unity of Command.