

After Action Report

DATE: July 7, 2011
SUBJECT: After Action Report – Monument Fire
FROM: Robert Hollister, Cochise County RACES Officer
TO: Mike Evans, CC Emergency Services
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CC: RACES Unit

1. PURPOSE:

This report briefly describes the support provided by the ARES/ RACES Communications team to the Cochise County Sheriff's Office for the Monument Fire between 14-24 June 2011. It does comment on some broad communications and operational issues noted during the deployment.

2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The ARES/RACES unit was asked to provide communications and administrative support to Sheriff's Department during the Monument Fire in southeast Cochise County. Initially we deployed one person to assist answering phones and keep an incident log at the Law Enforcement (LE) Branch Office at the Incident Command Post set up at Valley View Elementary School in Palominas. When the both the power, cell coverage and internet services dropped out on 18 June, the County Mobile Communications Unit (MCU) was deployed to provide cell enhancement and Internet coverage to the LE Branch. The next day a Joint Information Center (JIC) was established in Sierra Vista and the Sheriff's Office requested an additional person to assist answering phones and answering questions. On 19 June the Alternate LE Command Post at the Baptist Church was relocated due to fire proximity to Camino Segundo & Hwy 92. Since the power and Internet coverage had been reestablished at the primary command post, the MCU was moved to the alternate CP location to provide Internet coverage using the MCU satellite connection. As the fire danger to the community wound down, the support coverage was first terminated at the primary LE Branch office on 6/23, MCU coverage at the Alt CP also on 6/23, and the JIC on 6/24.

3. LESSONS LEARNED/ISSUES –

MCU Computers –

It was noticed that the Virus Protection and Windows Security updates were out of date. They were updated. We need to ensure that we update those on a more frequent basis.

More of our customers are using newer versions of MS Word that produce "docx" file extensions. We need to download the "docx" file viewers the next time we access the internet using the satellite. As the county migrates to newer versions of Microsoft Office, the computers in the MCU also need to have their software upgraded.

MCU Radios –

MCU Cache radios were issued to Elizabeth Philhower (Emerg. Svcs), AZ Rangers, and to the National Guard Soldiers.

As more of our customers migrate to P-25 digital modes, we need to ensure that additional P-25 radios are programmed for purchase. We currently only have one P-25 compliant radio in the MCU. Our current cache of ten portables are only narrow band, not P-25 digital, compliant. None of the eight radios in the ACU stack are P-25 compliant.

Shift assignment issues –

During the assignment handover from one crew member to another, part of the complete mission information briefing got dropped out. The handover was done verbally and probably should have been written down to ensure completeness. Additionally, there was an added element of stress involved as two of the members doing shift assignments were also in the process of being evacuated from their homes due to the rapid advance of the fire. The person picking up responsibility for making assignments during that changeover was not fully briefed that we now had three mission assignments requiring personnel (JIC/MCU/LE Branch). This was fairly quickly remedied but did cause a couple locations to be double covered or not covered at all.

Information Flow –

There were also several times when the information flow from and to the various information sources just got way out of synch causing credibility issues. This affected the volunteers working in the JIC as well as family members who were reacting to what they considered to be accurate information only to find out it wasn't. Things seemed to get better as the event progressed.

MCU Awning –

In the process of trying to maneuver the MCU through a very narrow gate at Valley View School, the rear awning support strut sustained damage when it was struck by a wind-blown gate. This has been repaired.

4. COMMENTS/OBSERVATIONS

a. The Communications Unit working under the control of Fire Incident Management Team did not include the communications requirements of LE Branch of the Operations Section in the Fire Comm Plan (ICS 205). The LE communications were handled primarily on two assigned talk paths: AIRS5 & DPS District 9. Functionally there were four elements: LE Command & Control, Traffic Control Points (TCP), Roving Patrol/Security, and Escort. A communication plan was drawn up to support this organization with four separate talk paths using the Federal Interoperability channels identified in the National Interoperability Field Operations Guide (NIFOG) for each function. Unfortunately we were unable to implement the plan because many of the LE organizations that came to assist did not have these channels loaded into their radios. Additionally, we did not have an assigned Communications Unit Leader (COMM-L) or Communications Technician (COMM-T) with necessary cables and software available to program the diverse set of radios represented across the agencies present. Consequently, much the traffic was allocated to AIRS5 with a portion of the TCP traffic handled on DPS District 9. The work around for this problem was having liaison officers from some of the groups present at the LE Branch office and information handled face-to-face with the respective Liaison Officer (LNO) (CCSO, SV PD, AZ DPS, Border Patrol, Forest Service, Military Police) and retransmitted on that agency's radio channel as needed.

A second problem noted concerned labeling of certain channels with agency radios. Several agencies appear not to be aware of the updated channel naming conventions for some of the Federal interoperability channels or of the Arizona Interagency Radio System (AIRS). There were a variety of labels applied (IARS, AERS, STATE AERS). Using a radio frequency counter and testing individual radios we were able to identify which channels in some of the agency radios were actually AIRS5 and mitigate some of the initial problems noted early on. Some radios were set on an AIRS frequency, but in simplex (car-to-car) mode and not set to use the repeater. We also identified some CCSO radios that were incorrectly programmed (incorrect Transmit/Receive Frequency pairs and/or PL Tones). By request, the Cochise County Radio Technician came to the alternate command post and made several corrections in the field. It is believed there may be other radios in the county inventory that need to be updated.

One final problem noted was the unintended interference on the AIRS system between two mountain top repeater sites and the two major fires (Wallow & Monument). Agencies working both fires were using AIRS but there was interference between the Heliograph site in the south and Greens Peak in the north. The fix to the problem was to contact the AZ DPS Operations section in Phoenix to have Heliograph temporarily turned off. They were able to effect that change remotely. The Monument Fire was still able to use the AIRS5 suite on Mule Mountain. Although this did not completely solve the problem, it made a significant improvement at both fire locations.

b. Despite the few issues uncovered during this exercise, I believe the ARES/RACES team did an outstanding job and accomplished the mission with high marks. Participation in events such as this provides great opportunities to practice our skills and discover potential problems as well as honing our skills. The opportunity to work closely with the various public safety agencies and develop those relationships that foster understanding of capabilities of how we can assist them with their communications needs cannot be underestimated.

5. ACTION ITEMS:

a. MCU Software - MCU operators need to ensure that we update our operating system and security/virus software on a more frequent basis. This can most easily be done each time we access the Internet using the satellite terminal.

b. Shift Schedules – Supervisors need to be more careful about documenting mission requirements and shift schedules and provide regular updates when there are changes.

c. MCU Radio Upgrades – Request the county include radio upgrades in their budget for the MCU to maintain currency with the changes occurring in our customer set and FCC legal requirements.

d. Communications Issues – Continue working with the AZ State Public Safety Interoperability Communications (PSIC) Office to educate the various public safety agencies in the state to adopt current talk-path naming conventions and to include state and federal interoperability channels in their radios.

Appendix – Participants
ARES/RACES Team

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