LEPC Railcar Training Exercise follow-up meeting

Mill Creek Fire Company, Marshallton, DE

February 19, 2015

Attending: Dave Irwin, LEPC for NCC, meeting chair; Tom Mitten, video producer; Mark Dolan, DNREC; Matt Higgins, DNREC; Jerry Brennan, DSFS; Mike Polo, DNREC; Ken Cenci, DNREC.

Meeting convened at 2:30pm. All in attendance introduced themselves.

Dave Irwin, chaired the meeting and asked if anyone had any additions or changes for the meeting agenda. None.

This meeting was scheduled to allow key representatives to discuss the creation of a video presentation designed to raise public awareness about issues involving preparedness of emergency responders to address incidents involving railcar transit of hazardous materials.

Tom Mitten outlined his history with the training exercise then presented an 8-minute video of various scenes recorded at the Railcar emergency Training Exercise conducted on August 23, 2014 in Delaware City. Mr. Mitten also expressed his concerns about the need for additional video footage in order to tell the story most credibly.

Discussion took place among the group regarding the video, particularly the aerial footage, and its value as a contributing factor to a public awareness presentation, as well as a review and training tool for responders.

Mr. Irwin then moved the discussion toward determining the type of presentation about railcar transit safety that should be created.

Mr. Dolan spoke about the exercise working within an integrated system and unified command. Mr. Mitten spoke about creating a public awareness video, with the general population as the target audience.

Mr. Dolan reminded everyone that questions from public officials and community groups, prior to this exercise, were directed at the capabilities and effectiveness of the volunteer fire companies to handle such an emergency incident.

Mr. Polo spoke about the recent railcar incident in West Virginia and how something of that magnitude would likely influence public opinion and raise concern about Delaware’s ability to handle such emergencies.

Mr. Mitten again mentioned the importance of including “normal operations” video as part of this presentation, to help assure the public that emergency incidents are the exception and not the norm.

Mr. Irwin emphasized that the message is centered around assuring the public that Delaware’s emergency responders are prepared to handle situations such as this, that they are well trained and practice their roles on a regular basis. However, a catastrophic incident such as the one in West Virginia could prove overwhelming.

Mr. Brennan expressed concern regarding some of the video footage being more technical and confusing to the public, without including specific explanation.

Mr. Polo reminded everyone that the video seen in this meeting is excerpts representing a small portion of the overall footage, that it has not been edited into a presentation, with narrative and graphic support, and that a script would be needed to ensure that the story is told in the desired manner.

Mr. Mitten further clarified his understanding of how the organizers of the training exercise went about creating the simulated emergency conditions and how, even though this differs from an actual incident, the goal is to enlighten the public as to the ability of the emergency personnel to address such incidents should they occur.

Mr. Irwin then brought the discussion back to “what is the message to convey in this video?” and the group explored this from each person’s perspective and understanding of the issue at hand.

The idea of having a representative from each agency or group that responds to an incident of this type speak about their role and involvement was deemed favorable.

The group continued discussion regarding various approaches and elements that might contribute to telling the story, through blending education with public awareness and reassurance. Any reference to actual emergency incidents of this type needs to be done in a straightforward, factual manner.

The consensus of the group is toward producing a 10 to 12-minute video that features an on-camera representative from each agency or group that would be involved in an emergency incident involving railcars and their contents.

Funds were secured to record the exercise and assemble a presentation based on that event. Mr. Irwin indicated these funds were finite and would likely fall short of what would be needed to produce a finished presentation such as that discussed in this meeting.

The ideas and direction this group has discussed regarding the presentation extend beyond the commitment of resources covered by the funds secured to date.

Mr. Polo outlined how the creative process for a project like this evolves and that having a competent storyteller lead the effort was the preferred way to proceed.

Mr. Mitten offered to draft an outline for the video and present it to the group for review, commentary and guidance. He also indicated that his overall commitment to the project would be taken into consideration when addressing additional funds needed to produce the desired presentation.

The meeting adjourned at 4:00pm.

Minutes compiled by Thomas J. Mitten.