

Case Study: Spreading Like a Wildfire

Coordinating Regional Information in a Major Incident—Lessons Learned from the Northern California Wildfires

The U.S. Forest Service and CalFire were responding effectively, but Public Information Officers understood that without fast distribution of coordinated public information, the response efforts would not result in building trust. They succeeded in accomplishing key communication goals by quickly implementing PIER as a Virtual Joint Information Center.



Overview

Event Profile

A massive thunderstorm in June 2008 resulted in 1,400 wildfires in Northern California.

Situation

Public Information Officers faced the challenge of coordinating and communicating the response efforts of 22 dispersed teams both internally and externally.

Solution

PIER provided a Virtual Joint Information Center to facilitate coordinated communication effectively and efficiently throughout the response.

Key Benefits

- Coordinated communications originating from 22 response teams.
- Provided a platform for a Virtual Joint Information Center.
- Website for communications with external audiences including the media.
- Ability to communicate private information securely.
- Easy to learn and use.

Event Profile

Fires are a common hazard in California, but the fires that resulted from a massive thunderstorm rolling across Northern California on June 20, 2008, took many by surprise. The wildfires typically expected in August, arrived in June. Almost immediately, 1,400 individual fires were burning, many threatening lives and property.

Two agencies rushed to respond: The U.S. Forest Service and CalFire. The U.S. Forest Service's jurisdiction is national forest land, while CalFire's responsibility is state and private land. As the primary response organizations, they worked together out of the Northern California Geographic Area Coordination Center (NCGACC) located in Redding, California to respond to fires in both jurisdictions.

Situation

Responding to a major event is routine for the seasoned professionals who staffed the Emergency Operations Center, and accompanying Joint Information Center (JIC). Very quickly, the numerous fires were organized into 22 different "complexes" or regional response teams. Complexes were organized along existing jurisdictional lines and included at least one Public Information Officer (PIO) from the responsible agency to coordinate public communication about the fires and the response in that complex.

While an information flow was established from each of these complexes with varying effectiveness, there were very significant communication challenges within the main operation center in Redding. A system used by the U.S. Forest Service in the past was unavailable. Restrictions on personal use of the internet from the CalFire network (designed to prevent unauthorized use) ended up making it difficult for many key responders to use email to keep up with the rapidly emerging situations in each complex. Complaints began to pile up about the lack of communication from both internal audiences (on-scene responders, government officials, participating agency officials), as well as external audiences. A Redding newspaper ran a story regarding this absence of information.

A solution was urgently needed to facilitate internal communication and enable the JIC to be the single voice for all complexes.

Solution

PIER Systems received a request for assistance on Friday, July 27. By the evening of July 28, Marc Mullen, Senior Vice President for PIER Systems arrived at the NCGACC facility in Redding. Having quickly established a PIER communications control center while in transit, an active JIC website was ready for use upon his arrival.

Tasks were many and urgent. Above all, responders needed a way to acquire accurate, up-to-the-minute information about the response in each complex. Information from each complex was pulled into the PIER center and quickly made available on the password-protected platform. Within hours, authorized visitors could view a complete picture of current activities updated in real time by the various complexes. Using PIER, JIC staff also pushed information releases out to the media. Mullen, using PIER's built-in database of 310,000 journalists, created a regional list of 500 plus reporters. Using this list, staff, including senior communicators from both the U.S. Forest Service and CalFire, secured Unified Command approval and distributed press releases via email.

PIER immediately improved internal coordinated communication. As a result, communicators sought approval to go public with a Joint Information Center website. After completing extensive approval protocols www.jointinformation.com went fully public giving the public and the media full visibility into all activities of each complex and Unified Command.

The Joint Information website displayed a continuous flow of releases including, evacuation advisories, information related to the death of a firefighter, aircraft deployment information, links to other websites, and a resource section that provided additional information such as a glossary of terms. Numerous images of the response were posted for media use.

Like all PIER sites, the Joint Information Center website is interactive allowing visitors to submit questions or comments, and register to receive email updates.

PIER Media Tools was also used to track media coverage and supply clips of selected coverage to JIC and response leaders.

Key Benefits

With PIER, the Joint Information Center could live up to its name in this massive response effort. Prior to implementing PIER, communication from the 22 complexes was not coordinated and no one could speak for the joint response. Individual agency websites provided information relevant to that agency, but could not function as a JIC website.

PIER, provided much more than a website. PIER provided a complete communication control center and enabled communication to both internal and external audiences simply and efficiently. Private information intended only for high-level responders was distributed via PIER completely separate from public distributions.

Over 25 team members were trained on PIER in the first few days. Some of those trained began training additional users. As complex as the communications challenge was, PIER enabled new users to quickly learn and become effective members of the JIC.

The use of PIER during the Northern California wildfires demonstrates the effectiveness of the simple web-based platform for coordinating public information. Utilizing PIER to facilitate their Joint Information Center, the U.S. Forest Service and CalFire managed to overcome the challenge of coordinating a dispersed response to communicate simply and effectively with a single voice.

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