

Federal Coordinating Officer Wrap-Up

by Mike Hall

Recovering from the wildfires that swept across Southern California presents special challenges.

The fires charred thousands of acres of mountainous terrain, difficult to access and vulnerable to post-fire floods and mud flows. People on rural tribal lands lost their homes. Utilities were damaged. Homes and infrastructure had to be rebuilt, and temporary shelter had to be found.

To make this happen, FEMA, the state, the Bureau of Indian Affairs and other emergency agencies partnered with tribes to create a task force with a unified command that respected the sovereign status of federally-recognized tribes.

FEMA's Community Relations specialists reached out to individuals in even the most remote areas, spreading the word about disaster assistance and gathering information on special needs. Mitigation experts met with tribal officials to help speed up plans to reduce the damage from future disasters.

Forestry specialists on Burned Area Emergency Response teams led studies of fire-ravaged hillsides to determine which posed the greatest threat of flooding and mud flows. These research teams recommended ways to protect down-slope property.

This spirit of cooperation and partnership lifted—then pushed forward—the process of recovery.

TRIBAL CONNECTIONS

Preparation—Response—Management for Emergencies

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Tribes, California, FEMA Share Fire Recovery

Mother Earth has many faces. She can smile and create fields of green, or she can make hillsides crackle and scorch beneath her hot, dry breath. And when hillsides burn, hands reach out, and people turn to each other for help. Neighbor to neighbor, agency to agency, a circle of recovery is born, and a healing process begins for the hillsides and the people who live on them.

In 2007, wind-whipped flames raced through San Diego County. The Poomacha fire destroyed more than 90 percent of the La Jolla Reservation and burned 59 homes. The Rincon Reservation lost 38 homes.

Wildfires, fueled by tinder-dry sage and chaparral, affected other reservations, including Mesa Grande, Pauma-Yuima, and Santa Ysabel.

Though remote and rural, tribal lands were nonetheless drawn into a broad community of relief and recovery, from voluntary agencies and private donations to government disaster assistance.

That effort began even before October 24, when President Bush declared a major disaster for seven Southern California counties, making federal disaster aid available in designated areas, including damaged tribal lands.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the California Governor's Office of Emergency Services (OES) assembled a unique task force to meet immediate emergency needs on tribal lands.

The task force met many challenges, including finding temporary housing for wildfire victims, clearing debris and assessing damages to the tribal infrastructure.

Emergency assistance came quickly, including a Multi-Agency Support Group that catalogued burn areas. The Bureau of Indian Affairs provided grants of up to \$1,000 to more than 800 tribal members who were forced by wildfires to leave the reservation.

Volunteers lent a helping hand, clearing debris from fire-destroyed home sites. The Wild Horse Foundation pledged monthly donations of hay to replace tribal livestock feed through the winter months. Tribal neighbors helped house those who were left homeless.

Recovery work continues through an inter-tribal Long-Term Recovery Committee, the first of its kind in the nation. Collectively, tribes, governments and non-profit agencies will bind the wounds left by the wildfire.

Be Prepared:

Designate an Emergency Manager

In the routine administration of emergency management, there is typically an individual who leads preparation activities such as emergency planning, training and disaster exercises.

Every government—tribal, state, county, city and town—should name an emergency manager. Both rural and urban areas are affected by wildfires and post-fire floods and mudflows. It is wise to identify an individual to run emergency planning and communications.

Given the nature of this work, quick access to a trained emergency manager is critical to saving human life, reducing human suffering and protecting property. With so many agencies involved in emergencies, tribal, county, state and federal governments should work together.

A "go to" individual is essential.



Tribal Leaders Meet for Long-Term Recovery

Pictured from left: Walter Powwall, La Jolla; Marion Linton, Santa Ysabel; Chairman Mark Romero, Mesa Grande; Chairman Johnny Hernandez, Santa Ysabel; Chairman Chris Devers, Pauma; Chairman Allen E. Lawson, Jr., San Pasqual; Fred Nelson, La Jolla; Denis Turner, Southern California Tribal Chairmen's Association.

In the world of disaster recovery and tribal cooperation, it was a historic meeting.

On the warm sunny afternoon of Feb. 7, 2008, at the Santa Ysabel Community Health Center, leaders from five Southern California tribes got together to form the first ever inter-tribal Long-Term Recovery Committee.

The mission they chose to take on is challenging but worthwhile—"to strengthen area-wide disaster coordination in tribal lands by sharing information, simplifying resident access to services, and jointly resolving cases with disaster-caused recovery needs."

The committee will be made up of tribal leaders and workers from volunteer groups in the area and from around the country, as well as representatives from local, state and federal government agencies.

After a major disaster, there are always people who need assistance beyond the initial help they get from the Red Cross, FEMA, the state, other organizations and federal agencies. When the initial resources are gone, the long-term recovery committees step in to provide further assistance through voluntary agencies and communities.

Among the more than 50 people attending the inter-tribal long-term recovery meeting were faith-based groups offering everything from help obtaining grants to the labor needed to build homes. Joann Hale, emergency response specialist with Church World Service, presented a check to the committee for \$5,000 to help pay for much-needed generators.

"We have lots of resources," Hale told the group. "All you have to do is ask."

During the meeting, tribal leaders formed an executive committee to coordinate and implement all inter-tribal long-term recovery efforts. Theresa Gregor, administrator for the Santa Ysabel Band which hosted the meeting, said that specific goals and committees will be determined in time for the next meeting, scheduled for early March at San Pasqual.

Gregor can be reached at 760-765-0845 or theresagregor@yahoo.com.

State Coordinating Officer Wrap-Up

by Henry Renteria

The recent Southern California wildfires scorched the drought-ridden landscape without regard to jurisdictional or political boundaries. Tribal lands, federal forests, state parks, counties and cities were all impacted by the flames.

The Governor's Office of Emergency Services (OES)—the state agency responsible for preparing for, responding to and recovering from disasters—coordinated the state response to the fires. We provided resources and personnel to communities, including tribal lands, to help protect lives and property during the fires.

In order to assist the tribal communities that suffered losses during the fires, OES coordinated with tribal governments, the Bureau of Indian Affairs and other federal agencies to provide generators, food, water, Red Cross services and other types of assistance.

During the recovery phase, OES worked closely with FEMA on the Tribal Task Force, the Housing Task Force and the Burned Area Emergency Response teams to make sure tribal needs were addressed while also respecting their sovereignty.

OES is committed to assisting California tribal governments in all aspects of emergency management to develop, implement and sustain effective tribal emergency management programs. OES promotes and facilitates coordination and communication between state, local and tribal governments on a broad spectrum of emergency management issues.

We stand ready to help our tribal neighbors in any way we can—before, during and after disaster.



California Governor's Office of Emergency Services

OES coordinates overall state-agency response to major disasters in support of local government. OES is also responsible for maintaining the State Emergency Plan and coordinating California's preparedness, mitigation, and recovery efforts. The state public information officer is Laurie Smith—916-845-8771.

Federal Emergency Management Agency

FEMA coordinates the federal government's role in preparing for, preventing, mitigating the effects of, responding to, and recovering from domestic disasters, whether natural or man-made, including acts of terror. The Region 9 acting tribal liaison is Tessa Badua-Larsen—510-627-7185.





The federal disaster declaration for the 2007 wildfires lists 12 affected reservations. Those tribes are: **Barona** Group of Capitan Grande Band of Mission Indians of the Barona Reservation, **Inaja** Band of Diegueño Mission Indians of the Inaja and Cosmit Reservation, **Jamul** Indian Village, **La Jolla** Band of the Luiseño Mission Indians of the La Jolla Reservation, **Mesa Grande** Band of Diegueño Mission Indians of the Mesa Grande Reservation, **Pala** Band of Luiseño Mission Indians of the Pala Reservation.

Also, **Pauma** Band of the Luiseño Mission Indians of the Pauma & Yuima Reservation, **Pechanga** Band of Luiseño Mission Indians of the Pechanga Reservation, **Rincon** Band of Luiseño Mission Indians of the Rincon Reservation, **San Pasqual** Band of Diegueño Mission Indians of California, **Santa Ysabel** Band of Diegueño Mission Indians of the Santa Ysabel Reservation, and **Viejas** Group of Capitan Grande Band of Mission Indians of the Viejas Reservation were affected.

Flames caused major destruction on the La Jolla and Rincon reservations. Their experiences are profiled in this newsletter. Other reservations suffered lesser damages but could see the scorched lands all around them. Virtually all felt indirect impacts, from road and business disruptions to an influx of evacuees needing temporary shelter. Now tribal leaders are preparing for the future, developing new and better emergency plans. They are reviewing the lessons they learned and studying ways to reduce the risks from future fires and other disasters.

Rincon Preparedness Saves Lives, Helps Neighbors

For the second time in four years, the Rincon Band of Luiseño Mission Indians saw a disastrous wildfire sweep across the reservation. But tribal officials say they were better prepared for the wildfires that erupted late last year.



They had plans in place to protect this small, tight-knit community located on 4,400 acres at California State Highway 76 and California S6, along the San Luis Rey River. Among the structures in its valleys and on its hillsides are 1,600 residences, a historic chapel, a museum and one large resort hotel and casino. There is also a small citrus grove and 150 acres of farmland.

In 2003 the Paradise fire raged through the reservation, burning many acres and destroying more than 20 homes. Roadways were blocked off, and the tribe's water system and landline phone communications were seriously damaged.

After the fire, tribal leaders put together a hazard mitigation plan "to reduce future loss of life, land and property." They cut down vegetation from under power lines, around water supply tanks and water pumps, and adopted stringent land-use regulations to prevent trees from being planted too close to buildings and utilities. They also built new roads and installed new fire hydrants, water lines and communication systems. To help lessen the effects of flooding, they cleared debris from culverts and storm drains.

The showpiece of their preparedness and response efforts is a new 13,000-square-foot fire station, equipped with five trucks, including a 75-foot ladder truck and a multi-purpose engine, staffed by 30 men and women.

At the same time, tribal members have come together to form a grass-roots communication network that knows every road and every dwelling on the reservation.

Last October, when the Poomacha wildfire erupted nearby and began its mad dash across the Rincon reservation, the tribe was a lot more prepared.

"Our equipment, coordination, and communications were all 100 percent better," said Dick Watenpaugh, Rincon director of tribal administration.

Although many homes were destroyed on the reservation last October, tribal officials say it is hard to put exact numbers on how many lives and homes in Rincon were saved by new equipment, better planning, alert safety personnel and volunteers.

What is known is that the Rincon Band was able to open the doors of its casino and turn much of its covered parking lot into additional shelter to house and feed not only hundreds of Rincon residents, casino employees and guests, but a few hundred more evacuees from the La Jolla reservation and other nearby reservations.

"We feel blessed that in addition to providing fire protection for our own people, we have the resources to assist neighboring communities," Tribal Chairman Vernon Wright said at the time.

But he added an important reminder: "Nature can be very humbling," he said, "and occasionally reminds us that, try as we might, humans aren't in charge of everything."



Tribal Chair Vernon Wright greets FEMA Region 9 Administrator Nancy Ward and Michael Hall, FEMA head of wildfire recovery.



La Jolla Planning Plays Prominent Role in Successful Evacuations

The Band of Luiseño Mission

Indians living on the La Jolla Indian Reservation in North San Diego County had long occupied a beautiful natural refuge that served as home and sustenance. In the shadow of Palomar Mountain, its winding river, oak trees, sage and wild flowers, its deer and rabbits all attract visitors to the campground. Acorns from the oaks were gathered for a special traditional native dish called “wii wish.”



Disaster struck the reservation Oct. 23, 2007. The Poomacha fire, fanned by hot, dry Santa Ana winds, burned more than 90 percent of the reservation’s 9,998 acres. Fifty-nine homes were destroyed, and 115 others suffered smoke damage. More than 180 tribal members were left homeless. Water pipes broke and other infrastructure was damaged.

Fortunately, the La Jolla Band had taken steps that helped with the wildfire response and recovery. After the 2003 wildfires charred thousands of acres nearby, tribal officials prepared for the future. They developed a multi-hazard mitigation plan to help reduce risks from future disasters. FEMA approved the plan Dec. 9, 2004, the first such approval for any tribal organization in California. A plan update was recently completed and approved Jan. 18, 2008. Having the plan in place helped speed up delivery of FEMA disaster assistance, such as reimbursement for the cost of repairs or reconstruction of the reservation’s heavily damaged infrastructure.

The reservation also had an emergency plan that was put to use when the 2007 fire erupted. The plan addressed the need to coordinate communications with first responders in the midst of an emergency. It also provided a guidepost for evacuating people in the path of the fire – and later the landslides and mud and debris flow. There was no loss of life.

Top photo: Aunt Rose Hatfield in her new mobile home on the La Jolla Reservation. She lost her previous home in the October wildfire.

Right: La Jolla Tribal Council members meet with FEMA. In the front row are Walter Powwall of the La Jolla Council, LaVonne Peck, Viola Peck and Fred Nelson. Behind them are Chairman Tracy Lee Nelson, FEMA Region 9 Administrator Nancy Ward and Federal Coordinating Officer Michael Hall.

FEMA and the tribe will share the costs and responsibilities associated with disaster assistance programs for the October wildfires.



WHAT IS MITIGATION

AND WHY WE SHOULD CARE ABOUT IT

Hundreds of years ago, the tribes of Southern California already were developing ways to reduce the risks of disaster. For instance, they conducted controlled burns that cleared away the scrub and underbrush, dangerous fuel for massive wildfires.

“They were scientists extraordinaire who had figured out how to live in this unpredictable environment and reduce risks to their families and future generations,” San Diego State University professor Lynn Gamble recently wrote in the San Diego Union-Tribune.

Today, wildfires, floods and other disasters continue to threaten Indian Country. Finding ways to protect lives and property is more important than ever.

The development and implementation of a solid mitigation plan can mean the difference between loss of life and lives saved, structural or land loss and minimal or no damage, minimal disruption of daily life, and reduced financial burden. A FEMA-approved mitigation plan may also generate more funds after a disaster.

But first, what exactly is mitigation? Simply put, mitigation is a series of actions that helps protect the land and the people on it. It is a way of taking care of the land and the people so that when nature’s storms of wind, fire, flood and earthquakes come, there is less chance of losing people and structures.

So what can we do to get ready before the next disaster strikes? Californians consider themselves lucky to be living in their state because it is a national leader in mitigation. Californians have written the book on preparing for the potential impacts of a wide variety of natural occurrences: wildfires, flooding, avalanches, earthquakes, the occasional tornado, even human-caused catastrophes.

Learn more about mitigation on the Internet.

www.fema.gov/plan/prevent/bestpractices/index.shtm

www.hazardmitigation.oes.ca.gov/plan/state_multi-hazard_mitigation_plan_shmp



Tribes Respond and Recover Together

There are many stories to share about heroism and sacrifice during last autumn's wildfires. Each person has friends and relatives who risked their lives or sacrificed their own possessions to help others, or who benefited from that generosity.

"It's sad that it happened," says Fred Nelson, treasurer of the La Jolla Band of Luiseño Indians, "but I'm glad it brought tribes together to help each other once again."

More than a third of their homes and nearly all their land was burned in the Poomacha fire, but La Jolla tribal members know their losses would have been greater and their recovery much harder if it were not for the help they received from all directions.

"Our sister tribes all came together to help one another," Nelson says. "Everybody chipped in."

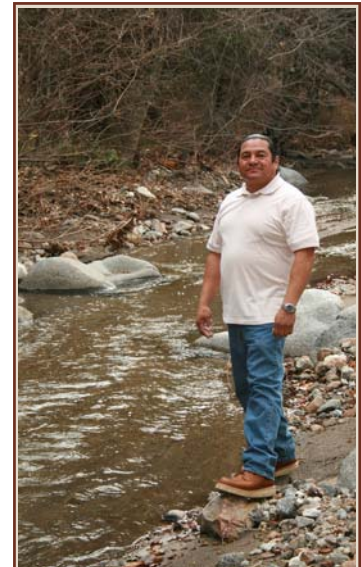
To the south of the La Jolla reservation, as the Witch fire raged, the people of the Mesa Grande Band of Diegueño Mission Indians relied on firefighters from the San Pasqual reservation for help. "We owe the saving of our buildings to two strike teams from the San Pasqual Fire Department," says Mesa Grande Tribal Chairman Mark Romero. "The San Pasqual teams used our trucks to save our structures."

The Rincon Band of Luiseño Indians, fighting fires that raged over two-thirds of their lands, sent critical firefighting

equipment, food and other supplies to their neighbors on the La Jolla Reservation. The Rincon opened the doors to Harrah's Casino, welcoming hundreds of La Jolla Reservation residents, firefighters, rescue and relief workers and others into hotel rooms and conference hall shelters. Harrah's executives took time away from their desks to help prepare and serve food.

Before the fires stopped spreading, the La Jolla Band evacuated from Rincon to Pauma, then Pechanga. "They put up our people, our kids, and everything," says Nelson. Lessons from the fires of 2007 and 2003 are being taken to heart among the tribes. They are sharing their knowledge and experience about how to prepare for fires, floods and other disasters, how to respond, and how best to recover.

Now, representatives from various tribes are gathering together to form an Inter-Tribal Long-Term Recovery Committee to provide help to people who have exhausted available disaster assistance.



Fred Nelson at a creek on the La Jolla Indian Campground that supports the tribe.

Tribal leaders are getting together one-on-one and in small groups to talk about cooperative agreements and memoranda of understanding to encourage and enable cooperation between and among tribes.

Nature is fickle. The 2003 fires raged through Rincon, Barona, Capitan Grande, Viejas, Inaja Cosmit and San Pasqual; in 2007 Rincon, La Jolla and Pauma-Yuima got the worst of it. Yet the tribes are not separate. Romero says the tribes have always stuck together. "Most of them grew up together and belong to the Southern California Tribal Chairmen's Association."

"Everybody has family on other reservations," says Nelson. "We have to rely on each other."



These professional Pala firefighters volunteer with the La Jolla fire department and are known as "Care Bears." From left, Harold Rodriguez, Capt. John Ruise and Joseph Ruise.

Financial help from one tribe to another, and tribal help to victims throughout San Diego County was plentiful during and after the Southern California wildfires of 2007. Some examples:

- The Pala Band of Mission Indians gave \$1 million to the La Jolla Band to buy 10 manufactured homes to replace homes destroyed by the fires.
- The San Manuel Band of Mission Indians donated \$1 million to the American Red Cross and other humanitarian organizations dedicated to helping people affected by the fires.
- The Pechanga Band of Luiseño Indians donated \$100,000 to support relief efforts.
- In addition to many other contributions to tribes in need, the Sycuan Band of the Kumeyaay Nation donated \$500,000 to the San Diego Foundation After-the-Fires Fund 2007 to help San Diegans rebuild.