

South Carolina Urban Search and Rescue Team Participates In Military Disaster Response Drill In Beaufort County

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Local, regional, state and military emergency crews conducted a full-scale disaster response simulation in Beaufort County. This five-day-long exercise involved nearly 2,345 military and civilian personnel responding to a mock earthquake scenario with partially collapsed buildings and trapped victims.

The entire scenario evolved as it would in real-time with local and regional agencies responding. When the magnitude of the event overwhelmed the resources of those agencies, the state was asked to provide assistance.

“We were able to provide equipment and specialists to the local and regional entities once we were on the ground,” stated Assistant State Fire Marshal - Daniel McManus and the Director for the State Urban Search and Rescue (US&R) Program, “our primary mission is to respond and support local/regional rescue operations as needed.” Director McManus and his team of nearly seventy-two specialist responded to this exercise with a little help from the National Guard. “We were air lifted from Columbia by two CH-47 Chinook Helicopters. With in about an hour we were able to transport sixty-six disaster response specialists and three canine teams with 4,600 lbs of cargo.” When asked about the US&R Team getting flown in, Director McManus stated “forming formal partnerships with agencies like Beaufort County Emergency Management and the folks from the National Guard is the foundation of training exercises such as these. Our agencies are forming a working (training) relationship now. So, not if-but when we meet in the future, we will be ready to respond effectively for our state.”



The first stages of response was initiated by the Bluffton Fire Department and supplemented by their regional building collapse search and rescue team based on Hilton Head Island. Rescue workers from both Hilton Head and Bluffton specialize in these types of incidents. “There are four regional response teams of this caliber in the state,” says Director McManus. “They are pre positioned in Greenville, Myrtle Beach, Charleston and Hilton Head/Bluffton. These local cities train and staff these regional teams with their most experienced rescue specialists. Their equipment is a step above what a normal fire department carries and can bridge the gap in a local to state level response, just like our state level US&R team bridges the gap in a federal response for South Carolina.” Director McManus also stated that the reason for the regional teams is so the state of South Carolina can mitigate and solve incidents in a tiered response. “We would prefer to have the incident be handled at the local or regional level first. But, if they need us, we can support them in a myriad of different ways.”



Seeing the state's US&R team's cache of equipment is visually over whelming. They provide four (4) fully loaded tractor trailers, four (4) Suburbans, one (1) 24' box truck, a full size 1-ton pick-up, a 24' box trailer and a 12' box trailer. "We are truly a self-sufficient team. We provide our team members with food, shelter, bathing, electricity, water and medical facilities. We also provide our own communications package of satellite/VoIP phones, data transitions and internet connections. The team's mission is to add to the local resources and rescue efforts, not drain them to support our team."

Past precedence has found that a federal response of rescue teams to an unpredicted event (such as an earthquake) could be delayed for over seventy-two to ninety-six hours before they would be in the area ready to go to work. "We have proven this week that we can mobilize and get on the road within our 4-to-6 hour window as predicted. As of today, we mobilized 72 personnel and 80,000 pieces of equipment, moved it 120 miles and were on the ground working within 8 hours. Not to bad of a timeline when we look back at what we have just accomplished. All of this is possible because of the time and dedication made by our personnel all year long." The state US&R Team is comprised of 140+ senior firefighters, paramedics and private industry personnel from every corner of the state.

"All of our men and women should be very proud of themselves for all the time, effort and hard work that take them away from their families." says Director McManus.

The US&R Team remained in Beaufort until Thursday April 24th, at which time they demobilized and took a return flight home to Columbia.

