MANAGING HAZ MATS IN AN ERA OF COUNTERTERRORISM

BY THOMAS MOSES

AT NO TIME IN OUR COUNTRY'S history has the need been greater to plan and work diligently to make better emergency response and remediation resources available more quickly. The lack of a coordinated collection of emergency response capabilities at the local, state, and even federal levels can seriously reduce the effectiveness of response efforts in catastrophes such as natural disasters, industrial accidents, and terrorist attacks. This situation is especially acute in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks, which have focused national attention on the security of hazardous materials and other substances that could be used as weapons of mass destruction.

DOT URGES STRICTER SECURITY FOR TRANSPORTATION OF HAZ MATS

More than 800,000 hazardous-materials shipments are made daily in the United States, according to the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT), which has proposed legislation aimed at strengthening security and safety in the transporting of the nation's hazardous materials. The Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) intends to visit 52,000 haz-mat haulers that carry the most hazardous materials, including anhydrous ammonia, poisonous gases, bulk explosives, and petroleum products. The FMCSA will request that carriers implement plans to improve personnel security, haz-mat package controls, and route security.

Secretary of Transportation Norman Mineta has indicated he believes that all modes of transportation in the United States are at risk, both as targets of terrorists and as weapons against Americans. Calling trucks "engines of the economy," he urged transporters to increase security to keep them from becoming "engines of destruction." He also said that tighter government security procedures will restrict the mobility of transporters but that they must understand this is no longer a time of business as usual.

TO IMPROVE HAZ-MAT SECURITY, LOCAL AND STATE REGULATORY AGENCIES ARE BECOMING STRICTER ABOUT ENFORCING SPILL NOTIFICATION REQUIREMENTS.

The law enforcement community has had to take on the additional jobs of ensuring security on the highways and staying alert to prevent planned destructive acts. Lt. Paul Sullivan, president of the Commercial Vehicle Safety Alliance (CVSA) and a member of the Massachusetts State Police, has stated that CVSA inspectors have increased the number of Level III (driver only) inspections for haz-mat haulers.

He has recommended that transporters consider new ways to track shipments in route and establish a hotline to notify authorities to ensure the proper response in questionable situations. He emphasized that whatever new procedures or security measures are introduced, they should be uniform and the personnel implementing them should be uniformly trained. Sullivan called on the 10,000 CVSA-certified inspectors and all program managers and safety partners, including industry, to work together to make the highways safe and secure.

NEW ELECTRONIC SYSTEM FOR RESPONSE MANAGEMENT

A unique electronic system has been developed to facilitate communication and coordination for law enforcement officials and first responders. It combines wireless communications, tracking technology, and access to specialized databases through the Internet. Response units equipped with onboard transmitters emitting unique, identifiable signals can be tracked in real time and their locations displayed on computer-generated maps.

The system can immediately locate emergency assets, assess their capabilities, and determine which units can respond to a particular incident in the shortest time. As a result, emergency responders will arrive at the incident scene faster and better prepared than ever before.

Prototypical systems integrating satellite and cellular technologies with extensive databases and compliance experts trained in haz-mat incident management have been created for fire service and haz-mat response companies. The systems offer centralized access to resources and critical information associated with haz-mat release events, biological and chemical weapons of mass destruction, and other dangerous substances not available in any other known system.

At the heart of the electronic emergency response management system is an equipment/capabilities database for fire service and other emergency responders. Each company is asked to maintain a current inventory of equipment and response capabilities in the database, which would be accessed through a secure, interactive Web site (www.spillcenter.com). Authorized personnel would be able to search that and other specialized databases when they need assistance or additional equipment during an emergency.

The electronic emergency response management system was designed to be expanded to include transporters of hazardous

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