

Burning Down the House: Public Affairs from a Bunker

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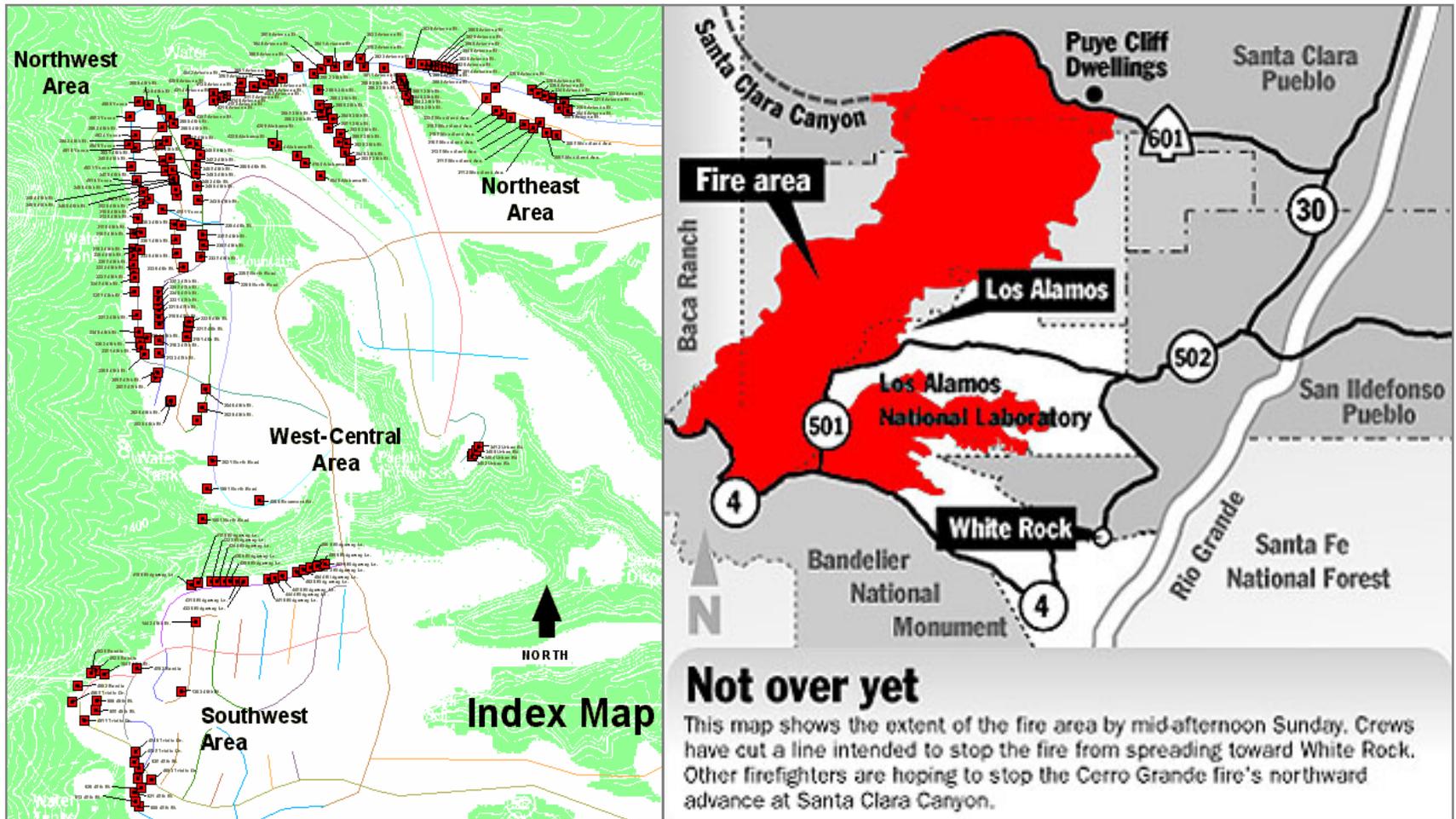
Los Alamos, New Mexico

EMI-SIG May 3, 2006



The Cerro Grande fire began May 4, 2000 as a prescribed “fuel treatment” by Bandelier National Monument, adjoining Los Alamos National Laboratory. The fire escaped control and became a wildfire that burned until June 6 over more than 48,000 acres of mountainous, high-desert terrain.

The Extent of the Cerro Grande Fire

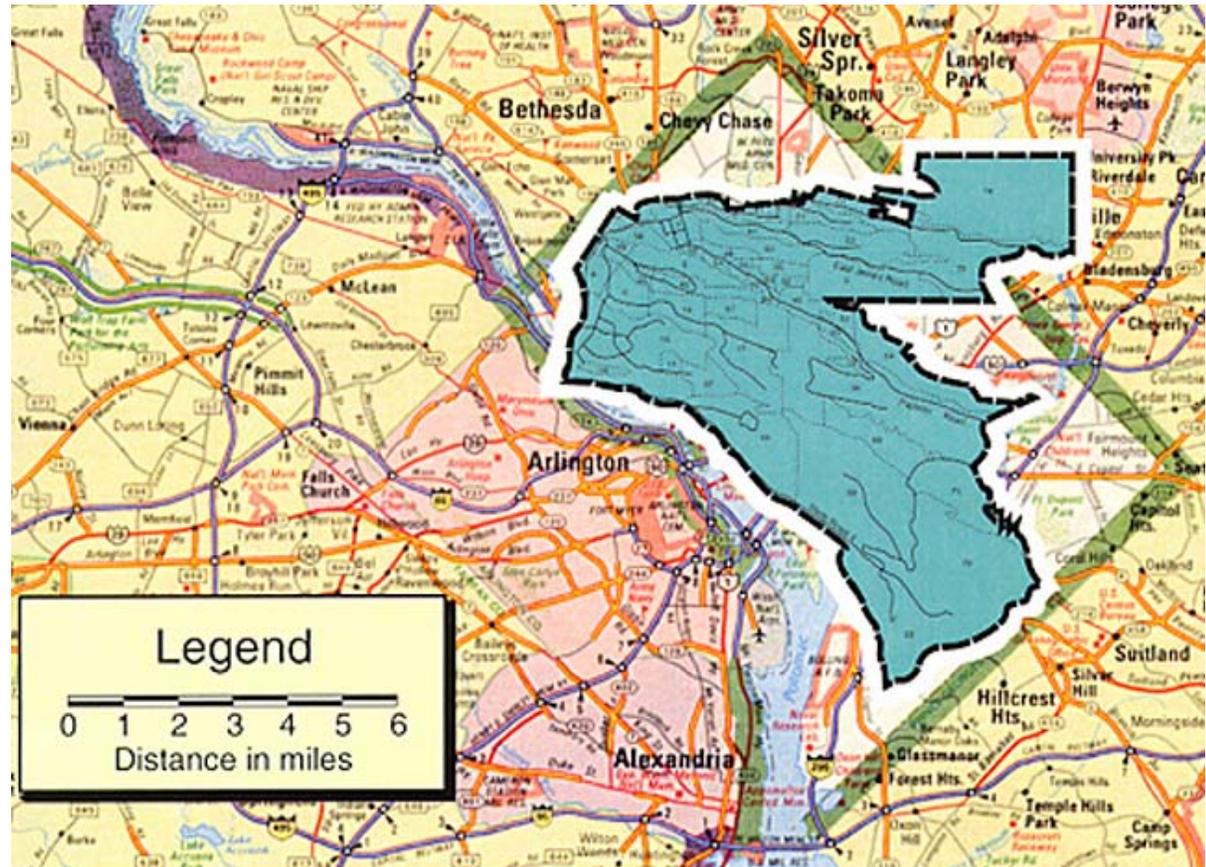


Houses burned at the forest interface -- 400 families lost their homes

UNCLASSIFIED

Los Alamos National Laboratory

- 39 square miles of Northern New Mexico's Jemez Mountains
- 2000 buildings, ~8 million sq. ft.
- 100 miles paved roads
- 30 miles 115 kV transmission lines
- 120 miles of gas transmission lines



LANL (green) compared with Washington, D.C.

The Threat to the Lab May 11, 2000

Former LANL Emergency Operations Center



Catastrophe Nullifies Preparation BUT . . .

- Realistic practice always helps
- Build inter-agency trust, even if the people next to you in the bunker aren't who you practiced with
- Pre-package information for every potential crisis
- Train your agency's reporters
- Make sure they can go to the scene
- Invite real-world reporters to your exercises or experienced mock media teams

A Communications Coordination Challenge

- Who had “irons in the fire?”



- *And* every politician for miles around, as the fire was spreading smoke “...and God knows what else” across three states

Four JICs in 14 days

Externally

- Let reporters know where you are
- Monitor ALL media sources
- Find a way to get PA staff to the scene
- Get in their faces: a dead photographer is a *really* bad headline
- Bust myths before they get on the air
 - NGOs will repeat what advances their own goals, not yours
 - Show reporters your physical proof -- actual air monitoring equipment, not pages of reports.
 - But show proof briefly *clearly* (. . . scientists, argh!)

Burning Town Site May 10, 2000



20 percent of Public Affairs staff lost their homes.

More on “Finding Things Out”

Using Alternate Data Sources

- There are usually clearly defined chains of command, but other links to useful information are essential . . .
 - Basic reporting skills
 - PA staff with radios on scene
 - Helpful reporters on scene
- Coming to the EOC table with a collection of potentially useful information was far more effective than waiting for data to fall from above
- Information sources can be bizarrely diverse
 - Parents of firefighters
 - Walk-in employees

What Did the Media Do?

- They put on firefighter shirts and ran into the forest to see the carnage up close.
 - They usually ran back out of the forest *really* fast.
- They interviewed each other in the town parking lot after all the “normal” people were gone.
- They repeated all the scare stories... “Plutonium in the smoke, poisons in the river,” etc.
- On the good side, they gave the fire chief a ride up in the news helicopter to survey a certain area, in return for an interview.
- They updated the community with the information they had, the only way displaced residents (and off-duty PIOs) could tell what was happening.

Odd Components

- Many of the PA crew were both covering the EOC and/or JIC, plus evacuating kids, dogs, cats, horses, chickens and their neighbors.
- With the county evacuated and under guard, EOC duty provided the access pass to check our homes on the way in and put cat food on the porch for the ones we couldn't find.
- The Web was an amazing resource for posting personal location updates, correcting bad information.
- The hard part was in making oneself sleep when off-duty, instead of watching the television for updates.

Heroes of the Cerro Grande Fire



...and sometimes a reporter or two dressing the part



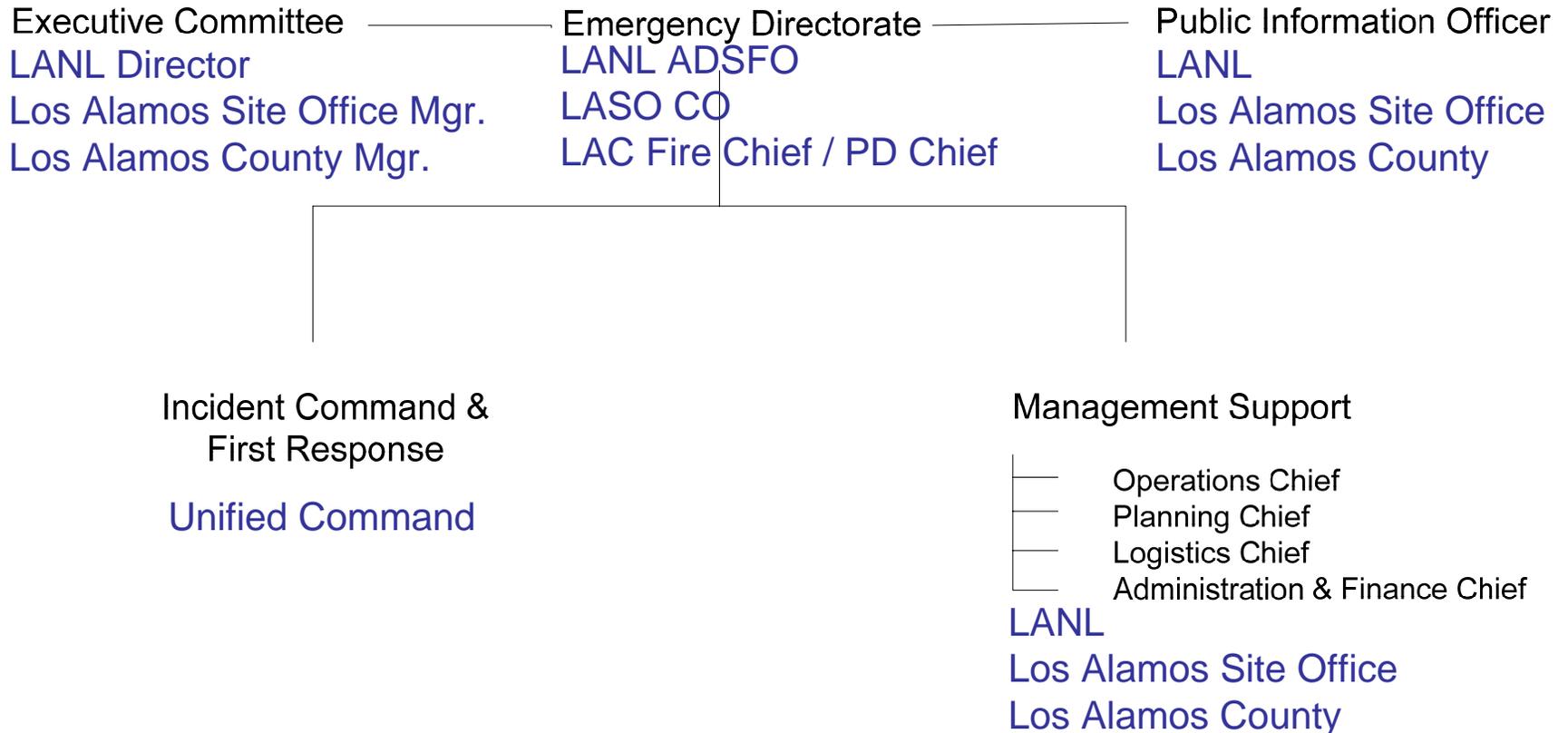
The Lab resumed operations on May 22, 2000—the day the fire was officially “contained,” although it smoked and continued burning in the hills until June 6.

So What's Different Now?

- Using National Incident Management System to integrate the Emergency Response Organization
- NIMS structures and functions
 - **Incident Command System (ICS)**
 - On-scene emergency management
 - Well practiced in implementing unified command
 - **Multi-agency Coordination Entity** — Los Alamos Emergency Response Organization
 - Prioritize incidents and associated resource allocation
 - Serve as focal point for issue resolution
 - **Multi-agency Coordination Centers** — Emergency Operation Center provides support, coordination
 - Identify resource shortages, issues
 - Gather / provide information
 - Implement multi-agency coordination entity decisions



Integrated Emergency Response Organization



Implementing NIMS at Los Alamos

- Integrated Emergency Response Organization
- Rewrote implementing procedures, checklists for the EOC
- ERO trained weekly from July through Nov. 2005
 - Now quarterly tabletops
- Full participation exercise Nov. 16, 2005 demonstrated total integration of the three jurisdictions
- Five-year exercise plan



Emergency Director Triumvirate

Los Alamos Emergency Public Information

- Unlike Cerro Grande with multiple “JICS,” competing news media availabilities...
- Lab, NNSA, County PIOs share a table in the EOC
- LASO / LANL / LA County Public Affairs staff the JIC
- County-owned JIC primary and secondary locations
- Shared / overlapping Emergency Public Information Plan for LANL / LASO / LA County



Mirror computer screens in EOC allow both sides of table to read news releases in draft

Our Final Word(s)...

- Emergency operations are NOT “normal” operations
 - Day job vs. emergency job clarification
- Reality is nothing like “practice reality”
 - Real emergencies resemble drills only in that they create high-stress environments.
- Emergency planning must build in
 - Skepticism
 - Curiosity
 - Creativity
 - Flexibility in gathering, distilling and disseminating information in emergency situations