



OFFICE OF LAND AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20460

February 3, 2026

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Emergency Response Initiative

FROM: John Busterud, Assistant Administrator

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TO: Regional Administrators, Assistant Administrators

The Office of Land and Emergency Management (OLEM) is launching a comprehensive Emergency Response Initiative (Initiative) to enhance EPA's ability to respond to natural and man-made emergencies with greater speed, precision, and effectiveness. Building on our experiences with emergency responses and mission assignments, including Deepwater Horizon (2010), Gold King Mine (2015), East Palestine (2023), California wildfires (2025), and Smitty's Supply Inc. (2025), this Initiative aims to create a gold standard program that leverages shared expertise, enhances readiness, and delivers timely, measurable results. To implement this Initiative, we will work closely with the regions and program offices and actively engage federal, state, tribal, and local partners, as well as the business community. Successful implementation of this Initiative will ensure that affected communities can recover quickly and safely as we deliver the human health and the environmental protections that all Americans expect and deserve.

RESPONSE PROGRAM ENHANCEMENTS

To advance EPA's emergency response capabilities, the following goals will be integrated into all EPA emergency response programs to address emerging community threats quickly while using taxpayer resources effectively and efficiently.

1. **Enhance coordination with and maximize use of state and local resources-** States and local entities possess a wide range of resources, including equipment and personnel, that can be brought to bear for a response. Because these assets are managed by individuals with local knowledge, they can often be used more efficiently than Federal resources. Properly utilizing these resources requires coordination before, during, and after an incident to build and maintain local capabilities, define expectations/roles and responsibilities for a response, and understand when it may be appropriate to transfer a response (or portions of a response) to local/state authorities. It is essential that EPA build and sustain relationships with state and local response authorities to optimize use of these resources when the need arises.
2. **Improve utilization of Incident Command Structure (ICS) to increase effectiveness and timeliness of cleanups-** For incidents that require full ICS activation, evaluating, training and refining how we employ each ICS function will allow EPA to meet response objectives more quickly, allowing communities to begin recovery sooner and often with lower cost. Developing

expanded training will reinforce adherence to the ICS structure ensuring appropriate staffing and full utilization of response personnel. These improvements will also help ensure that Unified Command needs are established early and maintained throughout the response.

3. **Incorporate both near- and long-term objectives in response planning-** Response plans should clearly define cleanup goals with pressure-tested, realistic timelines and costs to completion. Planning is a continuous process, and plans should be updated regularly to reflect evolving data, local conditions, and other site-specific factors.
4. **Increase coordination within EPA-** In addition to the regions, many EPA program offices have resources or additional authorities that could be utilized during a response. As we implement this Initiative, OLEM will work with EPA program offices, including OECA, OW, OAR, OCSPP, OITA, and ONSOC to use authorities beyond CERCLA, OPA, and the CWA to effectively respond and rebuild. In particular, early evaluation and use of enforcement authorities will help ensure that responsible parties are held accountable for their actions.
5. **Increase data collection and analysis to inform response decisions and assist in greater transparency and public communication-** By increasing the volume and type of data collected during incidents, including analytical sampling results and operational metrics, we can accelerate decision-making and responsiveness to impacted communities, strengthen stewardship of taxpayer funds, and provide additional transparency to the public. This data will also support continuous evaluation of progress, refinement of goals, and adjustment of plans to achieve them.
6. **Ensure timely and effective communication-** To ensure transparency and mission success, we need to communicate early and often both internally and with external stakeholders. Effective communication requires that EPA understand the risks posed to humans and the environment, manage those risks, and effectively engage and communicate with audiences about them. Work to increase coordination across EPA and with other response partners and to increase data collection will provide better quality and more timely information to inform risk communications. EPA will focus on setting clear objectives of what we want to achieve with each communication, evaluate the effectiveness by seeking group or individual feedback from local community members and then incorporating lessons learned into the next communication to continuously improve and increase effectiveness of communications.

BUILDING EMERGENCY RESPONSE CAPABILITY

Successful implementation of this Initiative will require both internal and external efforts to build capacity within EPA and with its partners. To achieve this objective, OLEM will take the following actions.

Development and Implementation of Rapid Response Task Force (RRTF)

As part of the Initiative, we are establishing a deployable Rapid Response Task Force (RRTF) that, when mobilized, will work with the Incident Commander and other IC staff to ensure:

1. Adherence to the Incident Command System.
2. Clear management objectives are developed.
3. Integration of essential communication protocols and regular engagement with impacted communities and headquarters.

The RRTF would be activated under the direction of Agency Leadership and deploy within 24 to 48 hours of an incident (dependent on-site conditions). We will develop and implement the RRTF in phases to be completed by the end of FY26.

Training and Exercises

Training will be an essential part of emergency response capacity building. Our responders require specific leadership skills and vision to effectively respond to emergencies to build and sustain these capabilities across EPA's response program. The RRTF will develop and deliver a training and exercise plan and curriculum focused on large-scale responses. This will include functional and tabletop exercises both at headquarters and in each region to increase response capacity and capabilities and promote consistency in EPA's approach.

Thank you for partnering with us in successful implementation of this Initiative. We cannot achieve these important and mission-critical goals without your expertise, collaboration, and commitment. Additional guidance on timelines, roles, and training will follow from OLEM and regional leadership as the Rapid Response Task Force comes online. By working together, we will deliver faster, safer, and more transparent responses that uphold our statutory responsibilities, steward taxpayer resources, and help communities recover quickly. Thank you for your continued dedication to protecting human health and the environment.

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