



# At a Glance

## Why We Did This Project

We performed this evaluation to determine whether the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency managed its resources for emergency responses to provide continued protection of human health and the environment during the coronavirus pandemic—that is, the SARS-CoV-2 virus and resultant COVID-19 disease. We also sought to examine whether the EPA provided sufficient protective measures to its on-scene coordinators, or OSCs, who respond to emergency incidents.

We sent surveys to 239 OSCs in June 2020 and received responses from 127—a 53 percent response rate. We also interviewed all ten EPA regional Superfund and Emergency Management Division directors, as well as directors from the EPA’s Office of Emergency Management.

### This report addresses the following:

- *Cleaning up and revitalizing land.*

### This report addresses a top EPA management challenge:

- *Maintaining operations during pandemic and natural disaster responses.*

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List of [OIG reports](#).

## ***EPA Has Sufficiently Managed Emergency Responses During the Pandemic but Needs to Procure More Supplies and Clarify Guidance***

### What We Found

EPA regions sufficiently protected human health and the environment by responding to emergencies or assisting in emergency responses during the coronavirus pandemic. In addition, the Agency took some initial measures to protect OSCs. For example, starting in March 2020, when the EPA began adjusting its operations because of the coronavirus pandemic, the Agency reviewed its ongoing and time-critical emergency responses, delaying responses when possible to do so without further detriment to public health or the environment. Also, some OSCs who normally would have been deployed were instead able to work remotely with state and local responders to verify that the emergency responses were adequate. The OSCs who responded to our survey, however, expressed concerns that the EPA did not provide sufficient protective measures or effectively manage its emergency responses:

**OSCs may not be safe deploying during the pandemic without sufficient personal protective equipment and clear guidance.**

- About half reported that the coronavirus pandemic impacted their ability to respond to emergencies. Some cited delays in procuring personal protective equipment and cleaning supplies, while some said there were delays due to the additional time needed to obtain approval for deployment.
- All said that the EPA did not provide COVID-19 tests to them before or after deployment.
- Although almost all indicated that they were familiar with the EPA’s health and safety guidance, some said that they had issues complying with the guidance, and some said that they needed clarifications on the guidance.

OSCs and management sometimes had different observations. For example, regional Superfund and Emergency Management Division directors said that personal protective equipment and other supplies were provided to OSCs. These directors also told us about the implications of the coronavirus pandemic on the Agency’s impending emergency responses. Specifically, a director in one western region stated that the region may be unable to respond to large incidents because of a lack of N95 masks, which the region deems necessary for wildfire responses.

### Recommendations and Planned Agency Corrective Actions

We recommend that the EPA implement a strategy to provide necessary personal protective equipment and cleaning supplies to OSCs, including N95 masks; develop communications mechanisms to address OSCs’ safety concerns; clarify its pandemic guidance; and provide COVID-19 tests to OSCs being deployed. The Agency agreed with one recommendation but disagreed with the other three.