



UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20460

OFFICE OF
LAND AND EMERGENCY
MANAGEMENT

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Response to Office of Inspector General Final Report No. 20-E-0332
“EPA Has Sufficiently Managed Emergency Responses During the Pandemic but
Needs to Procure More Supplies and Clarify Guidance,” dated
September 28, 2020

FROM: Peter C. Wright **Wright,**
Assistant Administrator

TO: Sean O’Donnell, Inspector General
Office of Inspector General

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Peter
Date: 2020.11.19 06:42:09
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Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the issues and recommendations in the subject report.

AGENCY’S OVERALL POSITION

As previously stated in the Agency’s response to the draft report, the Agency disagrees with the methodology and recommendations as written in the report. The report is almost entirely based on a voluntary employee survey and, ultimately, is just a “snapshot-in-time” of a very fluid and constantly evolving situation. Characterizing the Agency’s response to this global pandemic, based on the findings of a survey, while discounting available and subsequent agencywide guidelines, mischaracterizes the Agency’s efforts to protect its frontline employees.

The Agency has, and will continue to, respond appropriately and effectively to this ever-changing global pandemic. To that effect, and despite our disagreement with the methodology used to produce the report, the Agency’s response operations have implemented courses of action which have already addressed the recommendations. The EPA Emergency Response Program continues to leverage the best available information from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and EPA’s own guidance to provide the best information and safeguards to all On-Scene Coordinators (OSCs) in the field.

To date no region has reported a shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE), the emergency response program has continued to implement protective measures for our frontline employees, and the agency has responded to several significant national and regional emergencies effectively. EPA will continue this success by following the best available information and working collaboratively to ensure the effectiveness of the mission.

AGENCY’S RESPONSE TO REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS

Agreements

Rec. No.	Recommendation	High-Level Intended Corrective Action(s)	Estimated Completion by Quarter and FY
2	<p>OIG Recommendation 2: Develop and implement communication mechanisms to identify and clarify concerns that on-scene coordinators have that are not addressed in the existing guidelines, and make these communications available to all on-scene coordinators.</p> <p>OIG Comment: The planned corrective actions for Recommendation 2 meet the intent of the recommendation. The Agency’s response also includes an estimated completion date. We consider this recommendation resolved.</p>	<p>Solicit feedback from OSCs via several different mechanisms, such as Q&A webinars with the OSC community or regular meetings with their management teams. Document and maintain feedback on a commonly accessible location such as SharePoint or Microsoft Teams. Any concerns that are not adequately addressed within existing guidelines will be identified and addressed in a follow-up document, and with follow-up communication.</p>	FY 2021, Q2

Former Disagreements

Rec. No.	Recommendation	Agency Explanation/Response	Proposed Alternative
1	<p>OIG Recommendation 1: In coordination with all EPA regions, develop and implement a strategy to provide and distribute necessary personal protective equipment and cleaning supplies to on-scene coordinators, including the N95 masks needed to respond to wildfires.</p> <p>OIG Comment:</p>	<p>EPA throughout the pandemic has endeavored to ensure the health & safety of all personnel, including On-Scene Coordinators (OSCs) and worked through supply challenges to ensure that the appropriate COVID-19 PPE has been available when necessary for response and/or field work activities.</p> <p>Most recently, the Office of Land and Emergency</p>	<p>The Coordinated Guidelines released on October 30, 2020 resolves the recommendation that EPA “develop and implement a strategy to provide and distribute necessary personal protective equipment and cleaning supplies to on-scene coordinators, including the N95 masks needed to respond to wildfires”.</p>

	<p>The proposed revision appears to meet the intent of the original recommendation but lacks an actionable planned corrective action with an estimated completion date.</p>	<p>Management, in collaboration with the regions, released an updated PPE acquisition strategy entitled, “EPA COVID-19 PPE for ER response field activities” issued on October 30, 2020 (see Attachment A).</p> <p>This document provides additional guidance to the regions on PPE acquisition. Key points:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PPE Procurement Estimation Guidance • Procurement Approach • Greater success through smaller Regional purchases • Focus on R09 and R10 in support of on-going wildfire response • No National Buy • HQ Contribution and Role in Strategy Implementation • Procuring PPE for EPA’s Special Teams • Procuring PPE for Contingency Reserve 	
3	<p>OIG Recommendation 3: In coordination with all EPA regions, ensure that guidance and planning address deployment of on-scene coordinators in the event of large incidents during pandemics, including overcoming travel restrictions to respond to large incidents.</p> <p>OIG Comment: The proposed revision does not address additional guidance and planning that may be necessary when responding to large</p>	<p>EPA has issued specific guidelines addressing this OIG recommendation in COVID-19 Health and Safety Guidelines for Field Activities (Pages 7-10). EPA believes that guidance is responsive to the recommendation. EPA/OCFO is the AA-ship responsible for developing agency travel guidance.</p>	<p>OLEM plans, within 6 months of post-pandemic return to normal operations, to conduct and issue an after-action report to evaluate the effectiveness of EPA emergency response activities during the pandemic which will include an evaluation of response readiness with respect to travel restrictions.</p>

	incidents.		
4	<p>OIG Recommendation 4: In coordination with all EPA regions, pursue the acquisition of COVID-19 tests for all OSCs prior to and immediately after deployment.</p> <p>OIG Comment: The proposed revision is vague and does not indicate whether headquarters or regional pursuit of COVID-19 testing is acceptable, only that testing should be consistent with CDC and EPA guidance. The EPA’s July 6, 2020 guidance does not address testing. Furthermore, we do not agree that CDC guidance states that testing is not necessary. Rather, the CDC considers government hazardous materials responders as “critical infrastructure workers” and states that critical infrastructure workers may need to be tested, according to their employer’s guidelines. Testing is particularly important for regions that have a limited number of OSCs who may be required to quarantine for 14 days post-deployment or who may be deployed for weeks at a time. Depending on state or local restrictions, obtaining COVID-19 testing with rapid results would potentially free</p>	<p>EPA’s testing guidelines have followed, and continue to follow, the best available information and recommendations from within and outside the agency.</p> <p>Most recently, EPA has incorporated the latest CDC guidance published on October 21, 2020, entitled, “SARS-CoV-2 Testing Strategy: Considerations for Non-Healthcare Workplaces” into its operating guidelines. Key changes from previous CDC guidances:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Testing asymptomatic individuals with recent known or suspected exposure to SARS-CoV-2 to control transmission • Viral testing may be recommended for close contacts (people who have been within 6 feet for a total of 15 minutes or more) of persons with COVID-19 in jurisdictions with testing capacity. • A risk-based approach should take into consideration the 	<p>EPA has developed supplementary guidance issued on September 25, 2020 entitled, “Interim EPA COVID-19 Testing Guidelines for Region 9 and Region 10 FEMA Mission Assignment Field Deployment.” (see Attachment B) Key elements of this guidance are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who makes the determination about testing, testing type, and procurement (The Regional Incident Coordinator (RIC) and Incident Command Leadership) • When testing EPA personnel is appropriate • Types of tests that are appropriate • Test procurement • Response to Positive Test Result • Mission Assignment Guidance <p>In addition to the above-mentioned guidelines, additional region-specific</p>

	<p>quarantined OSCs for subsequent redeployment and verify that OSCs on long deployments do not test positive.</p>	<p>likelihood of exposure, which is affected by the characteristics of the workplace and the results of contact investigations.</p> <p>These new CDC recommendations have been incorporated into EPA’s latest operational guidelines.</p>	<p>guidelines were issued on October 14, 2020 entitled, “2020 Oregon Wildfires COVID-19 Standard Operating Procedures” (see Attachment C) and October 16, 2020 entitled, “Interim Implementation Plan for COVID Testing for Oregon Wildfire Disaster Response in Region 10.”(see Attachment D)</p> <p>EPA believes that these guidelines address the testing recommendation consistent with CDC and other federal agency guidance.</p>
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CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have any questions regarding this response, please have your staff contact the OLEM Audit liaison, Kecia Thornton, at (202) 566-1913 or Thornton.Kecia@epa.gov

Attachments

cc: Barry Breen
Steven Cook
Reggie Cheatham
Brendan Roache