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## Communication the first casualty of international mock emergency



Frank Dobrovnik

tim mckee, director of the Chippewa County Office of Emergency Services, keeps in touch with the latest developments using a hand-held radio.

By **FRANK DOBROVNIK**

Thursday, September 11, 2003 - 09:00

**Local News** - Just another freighter approaching the Soo Locks. Suddenly a package drops on board from the International Bridge overhead. As the vessel and its load enter the Poe Lock, the package explodes.

One day before the second anniversary of the worst terrorist attack on U.S. soil, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers conducted the largest exercise ever seen on one of the the world's busiest shipping canals, simulating another such scenario.

"We want people to see we're on point for the nation," said Lt. Col. Thomas Magness, commander of the Detroit district, after the two-hour role-playing exercise was completed late Wednesday morning.

Enforcement, health and emergency "first responder" agencies from both sides of the border participated, including the U.S. Coast Guard, all police and fire services, War Memorial Hospital, U.S. Customs. and Chippewa County central

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dispatch.

With such a large and varied contingent, clear communication became the first casualty.

Magness said the exercise in general went "very well," but everyone can work on "the importance of sending information left and right, up and down the chain," he acknowledged.

"I think all sides had common communication challenges: how do we talk to each other, what frequency are we on?" he said. "Where there are points of friction are when one agency oversteps the boundary of others."

In agreement was Chippewa County's emergency management coordinator.

"Sometimes you get federal agencies doing their thing, county agencies doing their own thing," said Tim McKee. "What we want is a co-ordinated response to emergencies, to get everybody on the same page."

A new 800 Mh radio system allowing "inter-operable communications" will go a long way toward that end, McKee said.

The communications system, funded by the Department of Homeland Security, will be in place Oct. 1 for all Chippewa County agencies served by central dispatch.

Although McKee's Office of Emergency Services helped plan the drill for the last nine months, emergency services had somewhat of a dry run only five days earlier.

A bomb threat shut down the International Bridge for two hours Friday.

"We learned last week that we didn't have a phone chain — who calls who," Magness said. "Things went much better today."

Neither bridge or marine traffic was affected Wednesday. Carriers had advance notice the locks would be closed for about two hours. Residents, too, were warned of the drill and the potential for noise and increased activity in and around the locks.

Not everybody got the message, though. Jody Landini rushed down from his home near Lake Superior State University after hearing an "explosion" around 9 a.m.

"I was listening to my scanner and heard a bunch of commotion about an explosion," said Landini, admitting to being worried that "there was something to do with 9/11."

Magness called the proximity to today's anniversary of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks "probably just a coincidence."

But he added that "it's certainly significant to me and all of us who ask, "Could this happen here?"

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