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Testimony to the Little Hoover Commission
May, 26, 2005

Thank you for the invitation to provide information and testimony to the Little Hoover Commission on the progress California has made in emergency preparedness and to identify priorities to further expand the State's capacity to respond quickly and effectively to natural and man-made disasters.

You have asked four specific questions and responses to each are outlined below:

What progress has California made since the Commission issued its 2002 and 2003 reports on improving emergency preparedness and where does further progress need to be made?

In reviewing the previous reports you provided – *Be Prepared: Getting Ready for New and Uncertain Dangers* (January 2002) and *To Protect & Prevent: Rebuilding California's Public Health System* (May 2003) – one conclusion is inescapable. Although California has made progress toward better preparation to respond effectively and efficiently to disasters, we are not yet well prepared.

The Commission correctly identified in its 2002 report that 1) All disasters are local; 2) Some communities are more ready than others; 3) There is no way to know who is really ready; and 4) There is no established baseline level of readiness.

California has prepared a myriad of plans and reports on disaster mitigation and response. Unfortunately, many – and perhaps even most – of these are little more than 'paper tigers' that feed the bureaucratic needs of state and federal government. They do little, if anything, to ensure California is really prepared to respond to large scale emergencies and disasters.

Unfortunately, our memories of the terrorist attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center and the as-yet-unsolved Anthrax attacks – and our focus on prevention of, planning for, and response to these types of events – have faded with time. We must continue to prepare for these unfortunate events because, despite our best efforts to prevent them, we will not be successful in preventing them all.

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California may be missing a golden opportunity to substantially improve, enhance and streamline its ability to respond in a coordinated, effective and efficient manner to natural and man-made disasters – such as the one outlined in the CHP/CDF Plan.

In January 2004, Governor Schwarzenegger formed the California Performance Review (CPR) to look for ways to streamline how California provides services to its citizens. We met with the administration, followed the process and attended the CPR Commission hearings.

Subsequent to the CPR Commission hearings, we met with other stakeholder groups and developed what has become referred-to as the “CHP/CDF Plan” – a proposal that the CPR Commission recommended the Governor consider and one that has bipartisan support in the Legislature. It is a good plan that is consistent with the philosophy promulgated by the Governor and one that represents both positive and feasible change. A copy of that document is enclosed.

It is unfortunate that reorganization of California’s public safety services has not been a higher priority.

Describe my experience with coordination and communication between federal, state and local officials in responding to large scale emergencies.

Prior to my position as legislative co-chair, a position shared with the President, I spent over 25 years in a leadership role with CDF Firefighters as a member of the State Board of Directors.

As an employee of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CDF), I have worked directly on many large scale emergencies – including fires, floods, civil disturbances, hazardous material releases, and earthquakes – with federal and local agency cooperators as well as private industries.

My experience has been that, although each agency has its own policies and procedures, coordination and cooperation are achievable if all participants are intimately familiar with the Incident Command System (ICS) and are willing to work together in a cooperative effort.

One area that is particularly distressing, however, is that common radio communications do not exist. This is true even between federal agencies with other federal agencies (e.g. US Forest Service with Military), state agencies with other state agencies (e.g. CDF, CHP and National Guard), and local agencies with other local agencies (e.g. police with fire and cities, counties and special districts with each other). In times of large scale emergencies, it is imperative that emergency responders have common radio communications.

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Have public health officers and emergency medical response teams been well integrated into exercises preparing for large scale emergencies?

The level of integration varies significantly among areas. Public health officers have been integrated into exercises more frequently in recent years, certainly subsequent to September 11, 2001, than in the past. However, we believe there are systemic changes that need to be made, which is why we support the CHP/CDF plan – which takes a major step toward delineating responsibilities and allowing fire and police to work together.

Outline my priorities for future exercises between CHP, CDF, National Guard, public health and other responders. Should California participate in an exercise similar to TOPOFF 3 with multiple states and countries?

While no training exercise can adequately replace actual, under-fire experience that is no reason to avoid frequent interagency exercises. Although it certainly makes sense, if I can say this again without kicking the horse, it makes absolute sense to have CHP and CDF under the same umbrella. The benefits of training exercises are real and the problems identified during training exercises are real. California should either participate in, or conduct its own version of, the TOPOFF 3 exercise.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this information. I look forward to responding to any questions you, or the Commission, may have.

Very truly yours,

Jim Rissmiller

Enclosure: 1