



All Hands On Deck:

The Alaska Multi Agency Coordination Group

By Michael Bradley

Huge pieces of ice began to pile up downriver from the village. Water and more ice backed up, spilling over the bank. Pushed by more water and ice, massive pieces of ice, some as large as trucks, tore through the village. Within hours the community was destroyed. Local residents described it as a “glacier on steroids” and “the day of the killer ice cubes.”

Farther south, a wildland fire was closing in on several communities. The terrain was rugged with steep gullies that hindered fire fighting efforts and seemed to help the fire spread more rapidly. Fire retardant dropped from aircraft was the only effective way to slow the spread. But air crews were distracted by the 9,000 foot peak to their south. It was an active volcano that erupted periodically over the last four months and could erupt again. Aircraft caught in an ash cloud would go down from engine failure.

Ash wasn't the only hazard. The volcano threatened a huge crude oil holding facility. Should those storage tanks rupture, a crude oil spill would cause a massive environmental catastrophe.

Reports of the new epidemic strain spread fast. First reports were hundreds, then thousands of cases with hundreds of deaths. Soon it crossed borders and then continents. The question was not if but when would it reach our state.

Is all of this in the new summer blockbuster disaster movie playing at most theaters? No, this was all going on in Alaska in May 2009. Flooding along the Yukon River was disastrous. The historic village of Eagle was destroyed by massive ice chunks that were driven through the 100-year-old community. The wildland fire on the Kenai Peninsula threatened

recall a time when so many significant disasters and emergencies hit the state all at the same time! Fortunately all of these crises were handled quite effectively because of partnerships among state agencies and other organizations that had evolved over the last few years.

The effort began in 2006 with formation of the Pandemic Flu Multi Agency Coordination Group, or MAC. The Pan Flu MAC group was a partnership of Alaska agencies and entities working closely together to respond to disasters and emergencies. The rationale for this partnership was that a pandemic could easily overwhelm health and public health resources in the state. If we had constructive partnerships to help support health and public health efforts we would be in a better position to manage a pandemic.

A year ago, the MAC started a shift away from pandemic flu to an all hazards focus. The timing was fortunate because when the disasters of May 2009 hit the state was ready. The MAC shifted to a unified command concept that provided coordination, guidance and oversight to the multiple responses going on. Fortunately a number of exercises had been held using the unified command concept so roles and responsibilities were familiar to participants.

Lead partners were the Alaska Divisions of Health and Social Services and Homeland Security and Emergency Management. Other state agencies also partnered, along with entities such as the state Hospital Association, and the Tribal Health System.

Leadership was shared between the Alaska Divisions of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness and Health and Social Services. Incident Commander responsibilities were shared

between the Public Health Preparedness Director in the Alaska Division of Health and Social Services

and the Chief of Operations in the Alaska Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management. From the perspective of those managing the response, the lines between public health and emergency management did not exist.

The unified command team worked out of the State Emergency Coordination Center that operated

Never, in 50 years of state history, had so many significant disasters and emergencies hit the state at the same time.

communities along Kachemak Bay. Mt. Redoubt had been erupting since January, spewing ash over thousands of miles, disrupting air traffic for weeks and threatening the crude oil tank farm along Cook Inlet. Then in late April, the H1N1 swine flu strain emerged as the new pandemic candidate.

In the 50 years of State history, no one could

