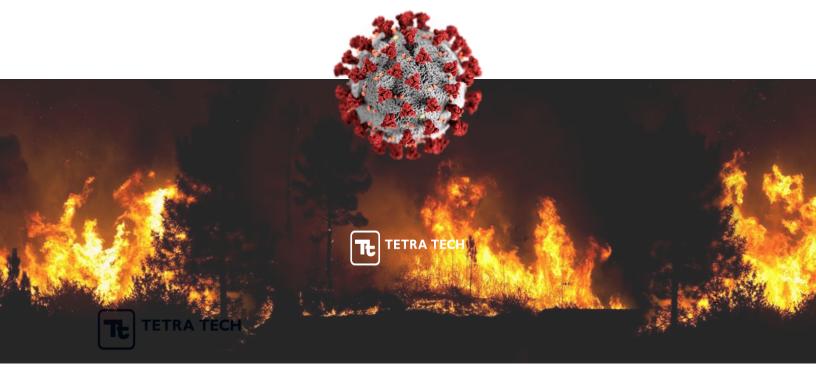# Sonoma County
COVID 19 / EOC Activation
Assessment Report

July 2021

Sonoma County COVID-19 / EOC Activation Assessment Report

Prepared for:
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INTRODUCTION

The year 2020 started like so many others. Within a few months, that normal changed in ways no one could have predicted. The COVID-19 crisis erupted in ways no one could have anticipated or expected. What ensued was a global pandemic that continues to the present. As with many other San Francisco Bay Area and California counties, Sonoma County activated it Emergency Operations Center (EOC) to manage the situation.

As the year progressed, California saw its worst year for wildfires in area burned at nearly 4.2 million acres.[1] Sonoma County deployed resources in response to the Walbridge, Glass, and Meyers Fires in the parts of the County.

In addition to these significant incidents, unseasonably high temperatures coupled with evacuations and Public Safety Power Shutdowns (PSPS) added to the mixture of situations facing Sonoma County leaders and officials to manage.

This Assessment Report attempted to capture feedback from participants, review data and documents, and deliver appropriate findings and recommendations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Tetra Tech would like to acknowledge all the individuals who participated in the process of providing feedback for the Assessment Report and contributions for the Improvement Plan. Their input provided the useful responses and comments that will help with future incident responses.

COUNTY PROFILE

Sonoma County lies north of the Golden Gate Bridge in the area known as the [San Francisco] North Bay. Sonoma County borders six counties – Mendocino to the north, Lake on the northeast, Napa to the east, Solano to the southeast, Contra Costa to the south and southeast, and Marin to the south. It borders the Pacific Ocean in the west.

While there are smaller communities on its western border, the majority of the County's population lies along U.S. Highway 101 in the eastern portion. California Department of Finance lists the County's 2020 population as 492,980.[2]

Major communities include these cities and towns:
- Cloverdale
- Cotati
- Healdsburg
- Petaluma
- Rohnert Park
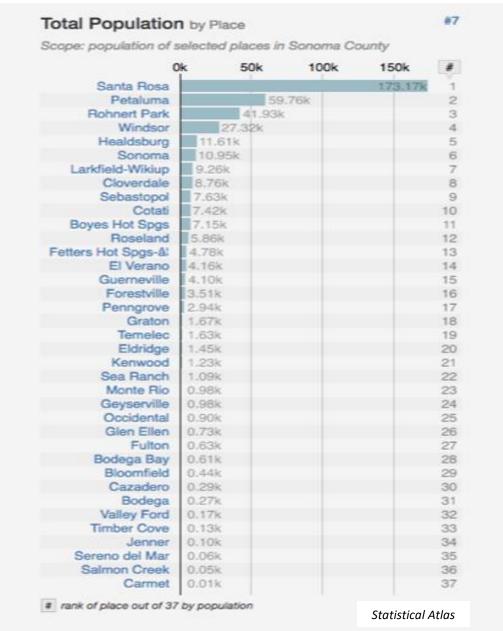- Santa Rosa
- Sebastopol
- Sonoma
- Windsor

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[1] CA Fire 2020 Incidents
[2] CA Dept of Finance - Population

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Total Population by Place   #7

Scope: population of selected places in Sonoma County

Place	Population	#
Santa Rosa	173.17k	1
Petaluma	59.76k	2
Rohnert Park	41.93k	3
Windsor	27.32k	4
Healdsburg	11.61k	5
Sonoma	10.95k	6
Larkfield-Wikiup	9.26k	7
Cloverdale	8.76k	8
Sebastopol	7.63k	9
Cotati	7.42k	10
Boyes Hot Spgs	7.15k	11
Roseland	5.86k	12
Fetters Hot Spgs-à!	4.78k	13
El Verano	4.16k	14
Guerneville	4.10k	15
Forestville	3.51k	16
Penngrove	2.94k	17
Graton	1.67k	18
Temelec	1.63k	19
Eldridge	1.45k	20
Kenwood	1.23k	21
Sea Ranch	1.09k	22
Monte Rio	0.98k	23
Geyserville	0.96k	24
Occidental	0.90k	25
Glen Ellen	0.73k	26
Fulton	0.63k	27
Bodega Bay	0.61k	28
Bloomfield	0.44k	29
Cazadero	0.29k	30
Bodega	0.27k	31
Valley Ford	0.17k	32
Timber Cove	0.13k	33
Jenner	0.10k	34
Sereno del Mar	0.06k	35
Salmon Creek	0.05k	36
Carmet	0.01k	37

\# rank of place out of 37 by population

Statistical Atlas

There are also several smaller communities scattered in the center of the County and along the western coast along CA Highway 1.
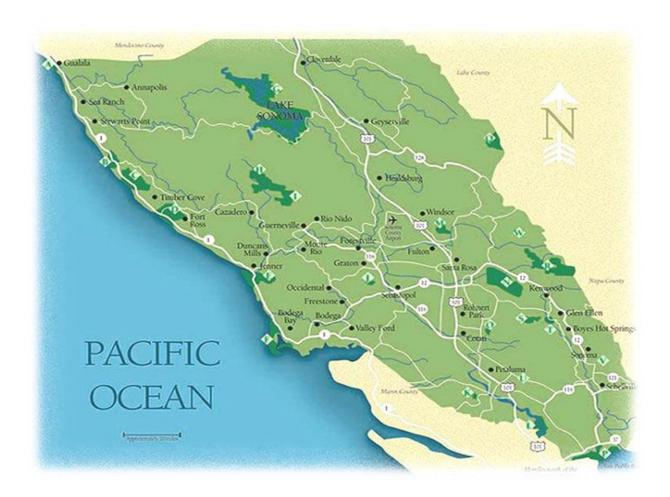
The County enjoys a Mediterranean climate and has a mixture of geography and environments from coastline and inland vineyards to Lake Sonoma to Sears Point Raceway and various coastal state parks and the Sea Ranch community to suburban cities and towns. With its headwaters in Mendocino County, the Russian River traverses much of the County before emptying into the Pacific Ocean near Bodega Bay. The County

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has managed several flooding incidents from this river over the years.

U.S. Highway 101 is a major commute corridor and artery between San Francisco and the Peninsula to northern Bay Area communities. CA Highway 1 connects many of the coastal communities; there are a few east-west state highways. The County has a number of general aviation airports as well as the Charles M. Schulz – Sonoma County Airport.
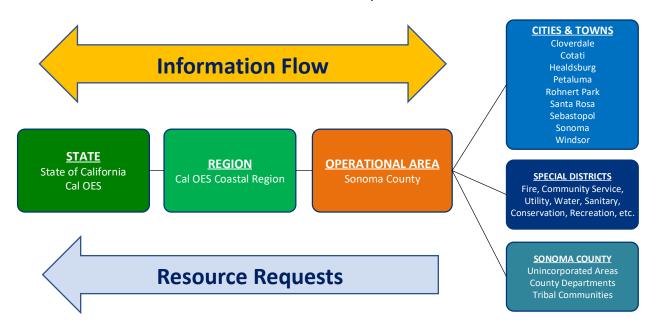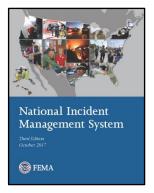
COUNTY SERVICES

Emergency Management

Sonoma County has adopted and utilizes the National Incident Management System (NIMS)[3], Incident Command System (ICS), and Standardized Emergency Management Systems (SEMS)[4]. As a SEMS participant, the County acts as Operational Area that includes all local governments, both municipal and special districts. The County's Department of Emergency Management (DEM) manages Operational Area activities and oversees unincorporated efforts.

SEMS also functions as a method for resource request as exhibited below:

NIMS serves as the standardized approach for incident management that was established following 9/11 by the Department of Homeland Security from Homeland Security Presidential Directive 5.[5] NIMS defines operational systems that guide how personnel works together during incidents. It provides a common vocabulary and coordination for all levels of government, non-government organizations, and the private sector to work together to prevent, protect against, mitigate, respond to, and recover from incidents.
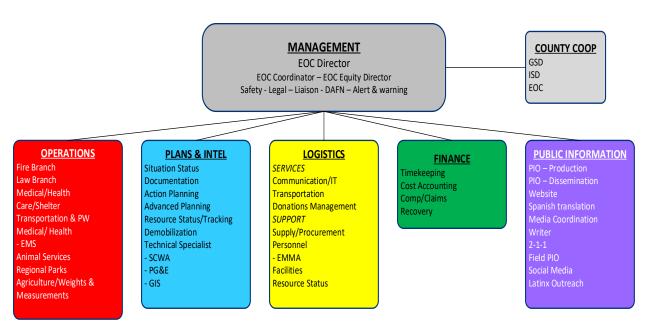
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[3] FEMA - NIMS
[4] Cal OES - SEMS
[5] Homeland Security Presidential Directive 5

| MANAGEMENT |
| EOC Director |
| EOC Coordinator – EOC Equity Director |
| Safety - Legal – Liaison - DAFN – Alert & warning |

COUNTY COOP
GSD
ISD
EOC

OPERATIONS
Fire Branch
Law Branch
Medical/Health
Care/Shelter
Transportation & PW
Medical/ Health
- EMS
Animal Services
Regional Parks
Agriculture/Weights & Measurements

PLANS & INTEL
Situation Status
Documentation
Action Planning
Advanced Planning
Resource Status/Tracking
Demobilization
Technical Specialist
- SCWA
- PG&E
- GIS

LOGISTICS
SERVICES
Communication/IT
Transportation
Donations Management
SUPPORT
Supply/Procurement
Personnel
- EMMA
Facilities
Resource Status

FINANCE
Timekeeping
Cost Accounting
Comp/Claims
Recovery

PUBLIC INFORMATION
PIO – Production
PIO – Dissemination
Website
Spanish translation
Media Coordination
Writer
2-1-1
Field PIO
Social Media
Latinx Outreach

Sonoma County ICS Chart Example

Fire Service

Sonoma County contains a variety of fire response areas. Fire service throughout the County is provided by more than 13 different agencies, from suburban fire agencies to rural fire districts, with most stations located along the US 101 corridor in the most populated areas. Fire response mutual aid exists within the County and statewide as part of the California Fire Service and Rescue Emergency Mutual Aid System Mutual Aid Plan (2019).[6]

Health Services

Health services throughout the County are overseen and managed at the County level through the Department of Health Services (DHS). The Department has more than 700 staff members serving various programs at multiple locations with the objectives of "Achieving Health", "Promoting Health", and "Protecting Health". The Department is divided into four divisions:

- Administration
- Behavioral Health
- Health Policy, Planning, and Evaluation
- Public Health

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[6] CA Fire Mutual Aid System

Public Health encompasses a comprehensive aspects of health care, including:

- Animal Shelter
- Disease Control Surveillance & Response
- Emergency Medical Services Oversight
- Environmental Health & Safety
- Family Health
- Healthy Communities

PROJECT

Background

Sonoma County activated its EOC on March 1, 2020, to manage the growing pandemic (COVID-19) crisis. The number of cases continued to increase during the year. A substantial number of Sonoma County and cities and town staff members had been involved in managing, supporting, or assisting the response.

Additional incidents occurred throughout the year that required attention from DEM and other staff members and responders; some of these events are listed in the table below.

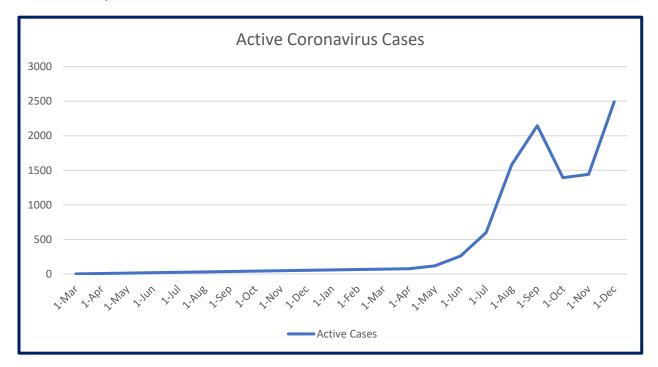| Events - 2020				
Dates	**Type of Event**	**Duration**	**EOC Activation**	**Declaration**
Jan 7 – Feb 3	JRT Encampment	28 days	Yes	Local
Mar 1	COVID-19 Pandemic	235 days	Yes	Federal
May 30 – Jun 20	Protests	22 days	No	
Aug 17 – 18	CAISO Rotating Outages			
Aug 18 – Sep 1	LNU Complex (Walbridge) Fire	15 days	Yes	Federal
Aug 20	Extreme heat		No	
Sep 8	PG&E Power Shutoff			
Sep 28 – Oct 5	Glass Fire	10 days	Yes	State
Oct 14 – 16	PG&E Power Shutoff	2 days	Yes	
Oct 21 – 22	PG&E Power Shutoff		No	
Oct 25 – 27	PG&E Power Shutoff	2.5 days	Yes	Local

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The chart below shows the number of Coronavirus (COVID-19) cases over the period March 1, 2020 through January 1, 2021:

Coronavirus Cases				
Date	**Active**	**New**	**Deaths**	**Recovered**
Mar 1	-	-	-	-
Mar 2	1	1	-	-
Apr 1	77	7	1	13
May 1	118	4	2	128
Jun 1	258	2	4	304
Jul 1	600	44	9	620
Aug 1	1,581	111	37	1,437
Sep 1	2,145	117	83	3,689
Oct 1	1,393	90	122	6,153
Nov 1	1,442	103	136	8,211
Dec 1	2,492	343	160	10,010
Jan 1, 2021	5,978	305	196	13,186

The graph below charts the active Coronavirus cases from March 2, 2000 through December 1, 2020.[7]

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[7] Sonoma County Coronavirus Cases

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Context

The County engaged Tetra Tech, Inc. (Tetra Tech) to provide a mid-operational assessment related to the EOC activation for COVID-19 and other incidents and development an improvement plan with the intent of planning for future incidents.

Scope

The project's scope was to assess the EOC activation and response during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, wildfires, and other incidents looking at the specific focus areas listed below during the time period of March 1 to May 15, 2020 and draft an assessment report and develop an improvement plan.

1. Operational Coordination
2. Public Information & warning
3. Emergency Operations Center functions
4. County COOP Operations
5. EOC & Health Services DOC Coordination

This report contains information beyond the May 15, 2000 time period.

Assessment

Assessment is an important industry practice to review, evaluate, and improve capabilities. The assessment plan was to review data and documents related to the EOC activation, solicit feedback from participants, and evaluate the information. A primary objective of this process is an improvement – "how can we do better". The purpose was not to point fingers, single out individuals, or criticize but rather explore ways to improve.

A prime focus in the assessment was looking at two questions:

- "Are we doing things right?"
- "Are we doing the right things?"

DEM staff identified more than 60 participants who were, at some level, involved with the activation. The participants were grouped into five areas:

1. Operations
2. Logistics
3. Finance
4. Planning
5. COOP

Interactive assessment included a survey and interview process. The objective was to capture feedback in multiple ways – the survey asked specific questions with numbered options for answers. The questions were designed to encompass the five focus areas. In contrast, interviews were designed to be more casual and interactive with the participant.

This configuration permitted a conversation between interviewer and participant rather than just answering a list of question with numbered answers. The intention was to gain a different perspective on the EOC activation.

Survey – Tetra Tech developed a draft survey based upon the five focus areas to solicit feedback from the identified list of participants. The survey was reviewed and edited by County DEM staff. Once finalized and approved by County DEM the survey was sent to the list of participants. The questions were written to capture a comprehensive picture from various angles in an attempt to solicit feedback surrounding the five focus areas. Survey questions were more direct, offering specific reply to options in contrast to the interview process, which was more casual, allowing participants to converse freely.

Questions from the survey included (from Operational Coordination):

1. How would you rate the inter-department and inter-agency coordination (Operational Coordination) that has taken place so far between the agencies in the EOC?
   a. Excellent
   b. Above average
   c. Average – similar to past responses
   d. Below average
   e. Poor
   f. Other (please explain)
2. How would you rate the coordination between the EOC and field units?
   a. Excellent
   b. Above average
   c. Average – similar to past responses
   d. Below average
   e. Poor
   f. Other (please explain)
3. What would improve coordination between agencies involved in the response? (check all that apply)
   a. Clearer directions and understanding shared between EOC and Management Section
   b. Implementation of a Policy Group comprised of leadership from the involved departments
   c. Improved intelligence/information from the field
   d. Clearer communication between the EOC Section Coordinator and Section Staff
   e. Increased interaction among EOC Sections
   f. More EOC Section Coordinator meetings
   g. Fewer EOC Section Coordinator meetings and/or updates
   h. Development of clearer operational goals and objectives
   i. Development of a written Public Health Emergency Action Plan (EAP) that coordinates with the EOC EAP
   j. Clear communication and direction between the EOC and HHS DOC field activities

Questions from the survey included (from EOC Performance and Functionality):

1. Overall, the County's response to the COVID-19 crisis has been?
   a. Excellent
   b. Above average
   c. Average – similar to past responses
   d. Below average

e. Poor
f. Other (please explain)
2. Thinking about best practices and things that went well the EOC as a whole, please check all that apply.
   a. Administration and management clearly communicated operational goals and objectives to the EOC staff
   b. EOC staff clearly communicated status and unmet need between Sections
   c. EOC staff understood their roles and responsibilities and were able to effectively implement tasks
   d. EOC staff had the necessary training and authorities to carry out their roles and responsibilities
   e. There was sufficient staffing available to accomplish tasks assigned by EOC management
   f. Staff was supplied with necessary tools, equipment, and supplies necessary to carry out their roles and responsibilities
   g. Coordination with the State was frequent, and information was shared in a manner that was actionable and clear
3. Thinking about potential improvements for the EOC operations, please check all that apply.
   a. Clearer communication of expectations from Administration would make it easier for EOC staff to carry out assigned tasks
   b. Clearer communication between EOC staff members would streamline operations
   c. Updated technology or access to additional technology would increase productivity
   d. Decreasing the number of staff in the EOC would increase productivity
4. Thinking about layout, conditions, and staffing of the EOC please check all that apply.
   a. The EOC layout provided adequate space for all staff members to operate
   b. The EOC space was cramped and did not provide adequate space for staff members to operate
   c. The EOC was close to necessary facilities for self-care and hygiene
   d. The EOC was too far from necessary facilities for self-care and hygiene
   e. The food and beverage options provided were healthy and met the needs and requirements of EOC staff
   f. The food and beverage options were not adequate for the needs and requirements of the EOC staff
   g. EOC staff were encouraged to take breaks and provided opportunities for self-care
   h. EOC staff were not provided adequate time to take breaks or opportunities for self-care
   i. EOC staff felt supported, encouraged, appreciated and/or validated by EOC management and section leads
   j. EOC staff did not feel supported, encouraged, appreciated, and/or validated by EOC management and section leads

Interviews – Participants were contacted by the Tetra Tech project team members and asked to participate in an interview. In order to allow participants a less structured setting than the survey, interviews were more casual and comfortable, allowing the participant to dialogue with the Tetra Tech project team member. This dialogue format permitted the participant to talk more openly and freely and provide feedback and information, including information that the survey may not have addressed. It afforded participants to be more specific versus the limited opportunity for details in a survey. The interviews allowed for

follow-up questions or soliciting additional information, whereas a survey has limited answers.

Interviewers asked some questions that prompted conversation and comments based upon a participant's role. Examples of standard questions included:

- Before we get to the questions, is there anything you want to say /talk about first?

Followed by

- What went right?
- What did we do right?
- What should we emphasize, repeat, or build on for next time?
- What didn't go right?
- What should we not repeat or not do next time?

Depending on the flow of the conversation, the interviewer may have picked up on an answer and said, "would you like to expand on that comment or tell me more about that" or "I'm not sure I understand, could you explain." Often there were follow-up questions, such as: "could you be more specific about that situation", "when you say it wasn't working, what do you mean", "what would see as a fix to that problem", "what would have worked better", "why was that a problem for you", "what did you do to try and remedy the issue", "did you said anything to anybody about it", and "that was a good idea or suggestion, did you mention it to someone". Moreover, based on the participant's role or position (e.g., EOC staff member (logistics, operations, finance, planning, overhead) or county cooperative), additional related or specific questions may have been asked. The Project Team allowed participants to speak freely and offer any feedback; interview times ranged from 10 to 45 minutes depending on what information the participant wanted to offer.

In order to solicit honest and frank feedback, both the survey and interview were conducted with anonymity. Neither participants names nor titles have not been associated with any specific comments, feedback, or answers.
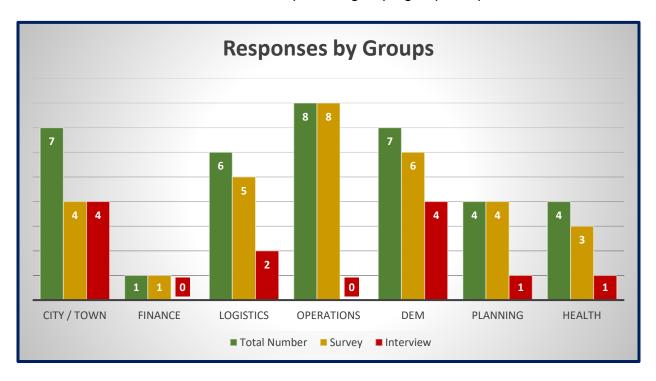
The total number of participants provided was 62; 31 people took the survey, and 16 responded to request for telephone interviews.
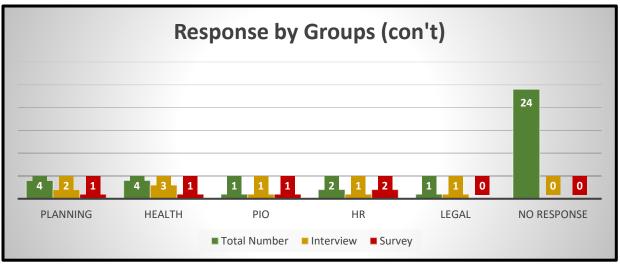
Participant Response

The charts below list feedback based upon the grouping of participants:

Responses by Groups

Response by Groups (con't)

	PLANNING	HEALTH	PIO	HR	LEGAL	NO RESPONSE
Total Number	4	4	1	2	1	24
Interview	2	3	1	1	1	0
Survey	1	1	1	2	0	0

Document Review – Sonoma County provided various documents related to the EOC activation, including Emergency Action Plans (EAPs), and field Incident Action Plans (IAPs).

SUMMARY OF CONDITIONS

Emergency managers, including those in Sonoma County, draft plans, procedures, and policies, prepare for and conducted trainings and exercises based on the most likely scenarios. Common scenarios include ones such as earthquakes, floods, slides, excessive heat, power shutdowns, and wildfire. Sonoma County has experienced many of these in the past several years.

While the United States has experienced pandemics in the past, few people, if any, would have predicted the current one and for it to be as widespread and long-lasting – even continuing to the present. As of January 1, 2021, the total number of active cases in Sonoma County is 5978. [8]

In the early days of the crisis, understanding the disease, its cause and transmission, prevention, and appropriate treatments were occurring simultaneously. With no recent history or experience for pandemics of this magnitude, officials rapidly formulated plans to protect responders, assist infected residents and set up care and testing sites. The EOC was activated and coupled with Public Health staff to collaborate efforts with efficiency and effectiveness

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[8] Sonoma County Coronavirus cases

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Management, coordination, and response efforts were challenged, sometimes daily, because of new information, findings, procedures, and protocols. Directions from the state or federal government would occasionally require operational modifications. San Francisco Bay Area Health Officers worked together on efforts to be consistent in their approaches and directives throughout the region.

Early in the crisis, public anxiety caused depletion of certain products, cleaning items, and medical-related supplies, such as masks and hand sanitizer. In some cases, these depletions or absence of stock resulted in the lack of availability for health care facilities and responders. Since the pandemic has been mainly viral in its transmission, first responders and health care workers faced a greater risk of possible exposure.

Initially, the EOC was staffed to address the COVID crisis. However, by late March, it became apparent that staff's close proximity made for less than optimal working conditions. The decision was made to transition to a virtual EOC; a small number of staff continued to be present in the EOC.

In addition to managing the growing and ever-changing pandemic crisis, DEM and city and county staffs were faced with protests, rolling blackouts, high temperatures, and power shutdowns. In late summer lightning, strikes started several fires in and around the wine county area. Many were grouped together and collectively known as LNU Lightning Complex; some of these fires increased in size and merged with other fires – Walbridge Fire merged with the smaller Stewart Fire near Lake Sonoma. The Meyers Fires was located along the coast. From late-summer into early October DEM, county fire officials and Cal Fire continued to monitor fire incidents in neighboring counties. The table below illustrates the size and location of the fires in the County.

Sonoma County Fires - 2020		
LNU Lightning Complex Fire (including Walbridge Fire)	Napa, Sonoma, Lake, Yolo, and Solano Counties	363,220 acres
Walbridge Fire	Near Lake Sonoma	55,209 acres
Meyers Fire	Sonoma County Coast	2,360 acres

Because of the number of significant events over the past few years, the County has increased its efforts in emergency management and capabilities to better address and manage its incidents. Such efforts have included:

- Creation of a separate Department of Emergency Management (DEM)
- Increase in DEM budget and staff
- Better utilization of technology (WebEOC and SoCoEmergency.com)

- Development and utilization of evacuation plan (evacuation zones)
- Outreach to high-risk areas for evacuation preparedness
- Communication protocols
- New Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP)
- Outreach to community groups (VOAD, COAD, COPE)

These upgrades and improvements, plus lessons learned from recent events, better equipped the County to manage 2020's incidents.

FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEWS AND SURVEY

The findings have been derived from survey and interview feedback provided to Tetra Tech project team. There was definite acknowledgment that in addition to the response, planning, preparing for, course correcting, adapting, and more were all occurring simultaneously. All interviews were conducted with anonymity; names nor titles have not been assigned to any comments or feedback.

While the survey was structured in its questions and allowed for optional answers, interviews were much more open-ended, permitting the individual freedom to express thoughts and feedback. Questions by the project team may have been followed up on a comment made or asking the interviewee to expand or elaborate. The Project Team had the latitude to pursue questions related to participant's comments as it related to their role or the scope of the project.

There were also the general questions – "what went well" and "what didn't go well". Because numerous people provided feedback, perceptions varied. Depending on their role -- County staff, EOC role, city or town staff, volunteer, or field worker – perspectives and perceptions differed. As with comparable evaluations, assessments, or feedback forms, people often focused on what did not go well versus what did. The majority of the survey responses for "Rating the Overall Response" to the situation was "*Above Average*".

The Tetra Tech Project Team reviewed the surveys and interviews in preparation for this assessment report. A summary of the feedback is provided below.

Perceived Gaps

After reviewing various feedback, comments, and suggestions, it seemed that there were some significant and apparent gaps:

- Not all staff who worked in the EOC had received consistent and similar training; additionally, there were people who hadn't received specific training for the position to which they were assigned. Some participants asked the Tetra Tech staff if there

is a minimum training requirement to work in the EOC (we suggested they direct that question to the DEM staff)

- Not everybody who was working in the EOC had a clear understanding of the current direction; "first-timers" didn't always know what was expected of them. The non-experienced staff didn't understand the reasoning of adhering to certain FEMA requirements.
- There seemed to be an apparent challenge with having two EOC Directors. Even through staff focused on the tasks at hand, EOC staff members expressed confusion, discord, and tension.

Using the idea of "how can we do better", these gaps can be remedied by:

1. Ensuring complete and comprehensive training for EOC positions and ensuring that the appropriate person(s) is selected for specific EOC positions
2. Clearly communicating the roles and responsibilities, and expectations for EOC staff members and explaining the nature of EOC work patterns
3. Practicing through various types of exercises, whether they are for the entire EOC staff of just a section specific one
4. There should be only 1 EOC Director – the DEM Director is "all hazard" trained and should be capable to manage an incident or multiple incidents simultaneously. The EOC Director can utilize specific county officials as subject matter experts.
5. Having a completely renovated and updated EOC capable of accommodating sustained operations and incorporating current infrastructure and technology or consider building a standalone EOC possibly including 9-1-1 communication would be optimal.

Positive

Knowing that Sonoma County has experienced more than its share of disasters and EOC activations over the last several years, one of the consistent responses was the appreciation of having "seasoned EOC staff" knowing that these coworkers knew their jobs – although some of them said it would be nice to take a break from seeing them so often.

Despite the number of incidents and time spent in the EOC, these seasoned staff members repeated their commitment to ensuring these emergencies were managed – "this is our community" was mentioned.

Overall, most people thought the response went well; "Above Average" was a consistent answer to this survey question. In addition to their constructive comments, participants had a positive attitude in wanting to help during emergencies.

 Listed below are significant or meaningful comments or feedback.

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Operation Coordination

- Several people said there was minimal impact regarding the addition of additional incidents during the activation
- Past event experiences proved useful in knowing how to function collectively
- Seasoned DEM management was beneficial in providing leadership throughout the event

Public Information & Warning

- Past events and lessons learned showed significant improved ways of communicating
- The creation of a PIO Section gave importance to communication and the need to communicate. With multiple platforms and technology pathways, having its own section proved valuable.
- Several people commented SoCo Emergency was a good website.

EOC Functions

- Collective sense from EOC staff, especially seasoned staff, that "this is what we do, we take care of our communities during a disaster."
- Participants made positive comments about the use and functionality of WebEOC
- Many people expressed appreciation for having seasoned EOC staff present throughout the activation; their presence was beneficial and reassuring
- The transition from actual EOC staffing to virtual relieved some anxiety among staff members
- Repeated response from the survey – "The food and beverage options provided were healthy and met the needs and requirements of the EOC staff"
- Observation from some is that as the situation progressed, the processes seem to improve (i.e., the flow of the operation seemed to get better)
- Human Resources was helpful in staffing resources.

Additional Positive Comments

- Some participant observed the ability of staff to adapt to changing circumstances, and others commented that it was an interesting way to meet other staff members whom they would otherwise not know
- A few people commented on the resiliency of staff, but also commented that it seemed to be the same people doing the work
- Several participants expressed their appreciation to County DEM for conducting an assessment report and the opportunity to provide feedback. Even those who made critical comments still said them with the hope of fostering improvement

Challenges / Constructive Criticism

With all the feedback, including those coupled with frustration and exasperation, people still expressed a wiliness and desire for improvement. As with other situations, this was another opportunity to explore ways to do things better. Additional comments included the sense that the pandemic had intensified everyone's anxiety levels.

Operation Coordination

- Because the incident continued to evolve and change, sometimes daily or even hourly, some people said it was difficult to keep up with the changing efforts and initiatives
- Some city leaders voiced that the County "moved forward without letting them know"
- Some city leaders expressed a disconnect between countywide health plans and keeping the cities informed
- Another challenge expressed by some city leaders was having regularly scheduled OA calls

EOC Function

- One of the most recurring critical comments in both the survey and interviews were having 2 EOC Directors. Many people found this to be disruptive and counter-productive – some people even commented on the tension felt in the EOC
- Several seasoned EOC staff noticed that Health staff were unfamiliar with EOC functions and had a challenging time fitting in and understanding operations.
- Numerous people commented on the limitations of the existing EOC. Given the frequency with which the EOC has been used in the past several years, below are some specific concerns that were identified:
  - Size, configuration, and layout of the room(s) – inadequate space – completely new and up-to-date facility would be ideal rather than trying to fix the current facility. The leading response in the survey was the "the EOC was cramped and didn't provide sufficient space to operate….'
  - HVAC issues
  - Ability to have updated technology – there were IT challenges
  - For sustained operations – better proximity to locker rooms, restrooms, break rooms
- Because there was little or no history of integrating public health into the Operations Section, there were questions – "does it belong to the Medical Branch or is its own Branch?" This caused confusion.
- Several survey responses expressed concern about the Health staff not following procurement procedures and unfamiliarity with EOC functionality.
- Additional comments echoed that the health staff was unfamiliar with ICS

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- Because of the mix of departments in the EOC, there were various comments about the use of unfamiliar abbreviations and vocabulary.
- Multiple people commented that there were people staffing positions in the EOC who had minimal or no ICS / EOC training; this included public health staff members. An additional concern was expressed because of this lack of training and understanding of the need to comply with certain FEMA regulations that might be necessary for reimbursement.
- Many people were puzzled about particular people being assigned to specific positions in the EOC either because of lack of training or personality/attitude or lack of collegiality. On the latter, there were comments that, given the tension of the situation, "people need to try and work together better – it's stressful for lots of us." Some participants commented on a staff member being "too verbally aggressive" – this incident made others feel uncomfortable.
- Few people commented that remote (virtual) work brought challenges – internet access, availability, reliability of video conferencing (e.g., Zoom calling), lack of access to resources (usually kept at work), lack of adequate work at home space, and distractions of home life.
- Some comments – there was an inconsistency regarding the use of and expectations of DSWs.

Public Information & Warning

- Suggestion from constructive criticism: regardless of the event, the delivery of public information should be by trained PIOs and use various officials as subject matter experts (fire, law, emergency management, health, etc.).
- There were a few questions asking if public information was being delivered to the most vulnerable communities and/or those with special needs.

COOP Operations

- Several people surveyed said they didn't know the County had a COOP plan; while others said they had read it but that was all – they didn't know how it worked – they hadn't received any training. Additionally, they continued that we should exercise it once we've received training.
- Comments reflected the need for consistent COOP program management

EOC & Health Services DOC Coordination

- There seemed to be a consensus that there was both poor coordination and communication between the EOC and Health Services staffs. Instead of collaborating, the perception was that there were often two competing operations occurring simultaneously. Participants observed that following coordination meetings "DHS would completely change direction". This proved to be disruptive to process and continuity. Others commented that instead of adhering to FEMA

requirements, especially in finance and purchasing, DHS staff often "just did their own thing".

Additional observations were the lack of EOC or emergency management training most DHS staff had. This was especially noteworthy when they were assigned to EOC positions. At times, seasoned EOC staff expressed exasperation when attempting to interact with the "untrained DHS staff".

- o From the survey question: "How would you rate the <u>communication</u> between the EOC and Health Services DOC?" The most common answers were "poor" or "below average".
- o From the survey question: "How would you rate the <u>coordination</u> between the EOC and Health Services DOC?" The most common answers were "poor" or "below average".
- The most notable observation by participants for poor or, at times, lack of cooperation was the tension between the two EOC Directors.

Additional Comments by participants

- Some staff members noted that it was, at times, challenging trying to do EOC work and simultaneously keep up with their regular job responsibilities; this was combined with the ebb and flow of EOC work – some staff were unclear why they needed to be in the EOC when there wasn't work for them to do. A few comments included, "can't we go back to our desk and do work and come back to the EOC if they need us."
- Some people expressed concern about "staff burn-out". It was especially challenging this time.
- One survey comment said the EOC vests need to be cleaned, and another asked, "why was there no hot-wash?"
- Additional training was needed to provide department staff with an understanding of their roles and responsibilities, including multiple simultaneous scenarios

Recurring Observations from Participants' Feedback

- Having 2 EOC Directors was not productive
- The unfamiliarity of Health staff with EOC operations, ICS awareness, and the need for following certain guidelines
- Communication
  - o The need for consistent communication EOC for status updates and changes; some people said they were well informed while others said they were not
  - o Frequent survey answer – "clearer communication and directions and understanding between EOC management and staff"

- Inconsistencies in the application and knowledge of DSW protocols and procedures

FINDINGS FROM DATA AND DOCUMENTS

Below is listed noteworthy comments and observation from the review of provided data.

Operation Coordination
- Documents noted that multiple incidents and other activities were present – recognizing that other emergencies do not stop during the COVID crisis and that the Planning Section expanded its energies to account for multiple field response and efforts (addressing PSPS, the need for cooling centers, mass care and shelters with modification for a pandemic, and treatment centers).

Public Information and Warning
- Coordinating public messaging with local schools proved to be helpful

EOC Function
- The presence and use of SEMS, NIMS, and ICS seemed consistent throughout all the documents
- There was consistent use of ICS forms, EAPs, IAPs throughout the activation
- Noted was the concept of advanced planning efforts to consider how and when to start downsizing EOC operations. The use of 'indicators' to begin that process was noteworthy.
- Ensure that all forms are completed, accurate, and reviewed before receiving an authorizing signature(s). It seemed that some forms contained inaccurate or incomplete information, such as a position having an "assistant" but no "lead" or one position reporting to three people.

SUGGESTIONS

Tetra Tech's Project Team members have worked both as emergency management practitioners as well as consultants. Building on the concept, "how can we do better", in addition to the recommendations listed in the Improvement Plan, the following suggestions have been developed by the team, are based on their experience, and derived from the findings. They are offered for your consideration.

- Ensure that information presented at briefings, Section Chief meetings, updates, etc. is communicated to all EOC staff
- Having "to go" bags with useful information and resources for people working from home who are assigned to EOC might prove useful

- Ensure staff gets regular breaks – get and walk around, go outside, etc. – as appropriate, have family stop by (especially parents with children)
- Consider creating EOC teams – red, white, blue – to ensure coverage; this can prove useful, especially during sustained operations
- Identify critical /essential EOC position and consider having "3 deep" staffing; ensure that they are trained for those positions – such as PIO, Section Chiefs, Documentation Unit Leader
- Develop plans for a renovated and updated EOC or possible consider a separate building that includes current technology.

EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT INDUSTRY TRENDS

The pandemic incident has had a noticeable impact on the emergency management industry and the way operations have been / are being conducted. Listed below are some apparent findings:

- EOCs were activated in early 2020 with some still being activated. In many cases, this has created unprecedented, sustained operations not previously experienced
- Staffing EOCs has revealed training insufficiencies, especially public health staff in regard to EOC operations and integration into emergency management procedures and FEMA reimbursement requirements
- Emergency management staff members have been assigned additional responsibilities, such as staffing vaccination centers and health care screening centers
- The lack of comprehensive and recurring training and exercises was reflected in EOC operations and functionality
- Having sustained operations showed an insufficient number of staff members trained in EOC operations
- Specifically related to the EOC Planning Section – the lack of knowledge or experience in compiling an adequate and complete Emergency Action Plan (EAP), and the insufficient planning ability – to do medium and long-term planning rather than reactionary planning that is comprehensive and collective

As a results of reviews, some of the improvements that have occurred in the past several months have included:

- Increase training and exercises for EOC participants
- Increasing trained EOC staff personnel and moving toward EOC team concept (e.g., red team, white team, blue team)
- Increase in emergency management staffing
- Increase in emergency management funding
- Relocating / redesigning / improving EOC functionality
- Upgrading technology
- Exploring alternative options for EOC operations including remote work

- Reworking the ability to manage sustained operations and/or multiple simultaneous incidents
- Renaming "Office of Emergency Services" to either "Office of Emergency Management" or "Department of Emergency Management"
- Repositioning emergency management on the jurisdiction's organizational chart and move it to a department level, similar to county health or public works or closer to the jurisdiction's executive (e.g., CAO, CEO, county manager, city manager)

Nationwide trends have shown an increased prominence and importance of emergency management roles and responsibilities.

CONCLUSION

Understanding that the COVID-19 flared up in March 2020 and responders reacted in a timely manner and that the situation continues through today, participants involved with providing feedback seemed willing and anxious to look for ways to improve the capabilities for responding to future incidents.

While there were multiple incidents and other activities occurring, the EOC seemed capable of managing them. Even though there was little or no experience from which to capture on managing a pandemic of such magnitude, the knowledge and practice of managing past incidents coupled with seasoned emergency management and seasoned EOC staff proved valuable. Given Sonoma County's disaster history, the County has benefitted from lessons learned and has shown great strides of improvement. The County again proved that it was capable of managing multiple incidents simultaneously.

Because the pandemic situation was frequently changing, challenges arose. Trying to plan and prepare for, respond to, manage, course correct, adapt, provide treatment – these all illustrated the difficulties at times.

Each EOC activation comes with its positives and challenges. Assessments of activities, processes, procedures, interactions, and more provide learned lessons for improvement.

Overall feedback was that the response was good and consistent was past incidents.

GLOSSARY

ACS	Alternate Care Site
AFN	Access and Functional Needs
Cal OES	California Governor's Office of Emergency Services
CAO	County Administrator Office
CDCR	California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation
CDPH	California Department of Public Health
COOP	Continuity of Operation Plan
DOC	Department Operation Center
DHS	Department of Health Services also U.S. Department of Homeland Security
DPW	Department of Public Works
DSW	Disaster Service Worker
EAP	Emergency Action Plan (usually in the EOC)
EMS	Emergency Medical Services
EMSA	Emergency Medical Services Authority (CA Health and Human Services Agency)
EOC	Emergency Operation Center
EOP	Emergency Operations Plan
FEMA	Federal Emergency Management Agency
HR	Human Resources
IAP	Incident Action Plan (usually in the field)
ICS	Incident Command System
IT	Information Technology
JIC	Joint Information Center
JIS	Joint Information System
MHOAC	Medical Health Operational Area Coordinator
MYTEP	Multiyear Training and Exercise Plan
NIMS	National Incident Management System
OA	Operational Area
OES	Office of Emergency Services
PG&E	Pacific Gas and Electric
PHO	Public Health Officer
PIO	Public Information Officer
POC	Point of Contact
POT	Point of Testing
PSPS	Public Safety Power Shutdown
SEMS	Standardize Emergency Management System
SMART	Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound (goals)
SME	Subject Matter Expert

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