I-95 Corridor Coalition
New England Highway Operations Group Exchange Workshop
Tabletop Exercise After Action Report
Summary prepared by Massachusetts DOT

Date: April 11, 2019

Overview:

All conference attendees were organized into three groups, who were presented with an identical, plausible disaster scenario over the course of two modules. The disaster scenario took place on the border between Massachusetts and New Hampshire, beginning with a dangerous thunderstorm outbreak. The storms then led to a traffic pile-up and road fires, as well as severe damage to a Lowe's Home Improvement store, leading to a potential hazmat scenario. Over the course of the exercise, the groups were asked how they would utilize drones in their response to the emergency, considering the complexity of the situation and the equipment available to them.

Objective:

The objective of this brief exercise was to give I-95 Corridor Coalition members a means to simulate how they might work together in a real incident, in a "no-fault" learning environment. The simulation also gave them a chance to share policy, procedures, and best practices on integrating drones into their emergency operations.

Lessons Learned:

1. You may be able to use drone data from reporters who are flying drones at the scene. As an attendee who flies for media noted, "Legally you can't have the data, but I can let you look through my monitor, or you can do a simple subpoena to get it yourself."

2. Make sure that mutual aid policies are in effect between towns on different sides of the state border, before an emergency takes place. This matters when it comes to using drones (or other novel technologies), too.

3. Have predefined interagency communications channels, so that people in different towns and states can readily communicate with one another. This may require acquiring new hardware.

4. Make sure that all departments that are involved in an emergency have good working relationships, in advance of an emergency.

5. Know what drones are useful for. Scene overview for incident commanders is one obvious example. Drones can also be used to look for more detail in a disaster situation, such as looking for indicators that a given vehicle may be carrying gasoline or other

potentially hazardous substances. In the simulation, we discussed using a drone to evaluate white smoke coming out of a Lowe's Home Improvement garden center; the drone enables responders to get a clearer view of the situation from a safer distance.

6. Keep your expectations realistic. A drone may not be a "game-changer" in a response and using one may not drastically change how you respond to a disaster in many cases. Consider how to integrate drones smoothly into what you're already doing, but don't think of it as a replacement for existing procedures.

7. Consider hazards to the drone itself, and the limitations of the drone you're using. Could contaminated smoke damage the drone? Could the drone be damaged or destroyed by fire? Think about the trade-off between damage to the drone (or a potential drone crash) versus the value of the data you're collecting.

8. Awareness of what airspace you're operating in and ensuring that drone pilots are legally permitted to fly there. Setting up protocols for getting permission to fly in the airspace should happen before emergency strikes. It's also important to ensure that all drone pilots hold Part 107 licenses or have a similar training standard as approved by a COA.

9. Know what to do if a bystander with a drone offers to help. Their help can be a liability; you don't know their skill level, maintenance procedures for their drone, or many other relevant things. However, outright refusing their help may result in the drone-owner deciding to fly anyway, creating logistical and safety problems for you. Perhaps you can ask them to be "on standby," ensuring that they feel 'useful' while keeping them out of the way.