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January 18, 2019

#### MEMORANDUM

TO: The Honorable Thomas C. Wright, Chair, House Militia, Police and Public  
Safety Committee  
The Honorable Frank M. Ruff, Jr., Chair, Senate Committee on General  
Laws and Technology

VIA: Brian J. Moran, Secretary of Public Safety & Homeland Security

FROM: Jeffrey D. Stern, State Coordinator

SUBJECT: 2018 Virginia Emergency Support Team Exercise (VESTEX) Report

In accordance with § 44-146.17:2 of the *Code of Virginia*, I am pleased to submit the Virginia Department of Emergency Management's *Virginia Emergency Support Team Exercise Report* for 2018.

VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

# 2018 Virginia Emergency Support Team Exercise (VESTEX) Report

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§ 44-146.17:2

January 2019

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## **PREFACE**

Section 44-146.17:2 of the *Code of Virginia*, relating to the annual statewide drill, was approved April 12, 2004. The law reads as follows:

The Governor shall conduct an annual statewide drill on response to a large-scale disaster including, but not limited to, electrical power outages. Such drill shall include the participation of local governments, affected state agencies, public utilities, law-enforcement agencies, and other entities as determined by the Governor. The Governor shall submit a report to the General Assembly on the results of the drill by November 30 of each year. The report shall be delivered to the chairs of the House Committee on Militia, Police, and Public Safety and the Senate Committee on General Laws.

The annual Virginia Emergency Support Team Exercise (VESTEX) is intended to prepare the Commonwealth of Virginia for potential threats by measuring current capabilities, policies, and procedures against the requirement to properly mitigate, respond to, and recover from man-made and natural disasters impacting the Commonwealth. This report is a summary of the VESTEX functional exercise, conducted in May 2018, and provides information on how the exercise was designed and conducted, along with the outcomes of the exercise to include opportunities for improvement.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On May 7, 2018, VDEM took part in a FEMA sponsored National Level Exercise (NLE) for a fictional hurricane striking the mid-Atlantic. The Virginia Emergency Support Team Exercise (VESTEX) 2018 was a functional exercise designed to examine the ability of all levels of government, private industry, nongovernmental organizations, communities, and individuals to protect against, respond to, recover from, and implement continuity plans related to a major hurricane with localized catastrophic impacts. VESTEX exercised the Commonwealth of Virginia Emergency Operations Plan (COVEOP), in compliance with Section 44-146 17:2 of the Code of Virginia, Military and Emergency Laws, Annual Statewide Drill, and local emergency operations plans.

Participants included the Virginia Emergency Support Team (VEST), which consists of over 40 state agencies, VDEM Regions 1, 2, 5 and 7 staff, and 38 localities.

The following exercise-specific objectives were evaluated and successfully completed:

- Demonstrate the ability of the VEST Command and General Staff to establish incident management and Incident Action Planning processes in response to a natural disaster that impacts the Commonwealth in accordance with the National Incident Management System (NIMS) and existing plans, policies, and procedures.
- Demonstrate the ability of the VEST Operations Section to coordinate the management of Emergency Support Function (ESF) operations in response to a natural disaster impacting the Commonwealth in accordance with existing plans, policies and procedures.
- Evaluate the ability of the VEST Logistics Section to provide facilities, services and support in response to a natural disaster that impacts the Commonwealth in accordance with established plans, policies and procedures.
- Demonstrate the ability of the Joint Information Center (JIC) to deliver coordinated, prompt and actionable incident information in response to a natural disaster that impacts the Commonwealth in accordance with existing plans, policies and procedures.

While this exercise highlighted many successes, there were some needing improvement. Information Technology (IT) systems were unreliable. For example, in the Virginia Emergency Operations Center (VEOC), some of the screens that had been displaying information would time out and become blank. There was also latency with WebEOC, WiFi problems, and technology infrastructure weakness.

## **VESTEX 2018 OVERVIEW**

The VESTEX engaged ESFs, private sector partners, and localities in discussing response plans, policies, and procedures for a catastrophic hurricane that made landfall in the Hampton Roads area. This exercise demonstrated the Commonwealth's response following landfall.

Exercise participants examined protocols and plans of regional and local emergency operations plans, the COVEOP, National Interagency Plans, and additional departmental and agency plans to respond to a hurricane incident. Players were actively engaged in the response operations following landfall of a fictional hurricane, Hurricane Cora. ESFs successfully responded and worked together in order to coordinate response and reduce the impact of cascading effects across the region.

The 2018 FEMA National Level Exercise included over 1,000 players representing 264 participating agencies. All six states in FEMA Region III participated: VA, MD, DC, PA, DE and WV. The widespread participation allowed interaction with various organizations throughout the region. This exercise built upon lessons learned from the 2017 Atlantic Hurricane Season with a unified scenario and control environment for all exercise play. Virginia's one day of exercise play occurred three days post-landfall in the scenario, and the findings in this review capture observations from that day.

## **PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS AND AGENCIES**

### **Localities**

Accomack County

Alexandria City

Amelia County

Arlington County

Brunswick County

Chesapeake City

Chesterfield County

Culpeper County

Fairfax City

Fairfax County

Fredericksburg City

Gloucester County

Goochland County

Hampton City

Henrico (May 8 play)

James City County

King George County

King William County

Lancaster County

Powhatan County

Portsmouth City

Prince George County

Prince William County

Richmond County

Stafford County

Suffolk City

Virginia Beach City

Warren County

Williamsburg City

Winchester City

York County

Loudoun County

Manassas City

Mathews County

New Kent County

Newport News City

Norfolk City

Nottoway County

Poquoson City

### **Agencies**

- American Red Cross
- Army Corps of Engineers
- Department of Conservation and Recreation
- Dominion Energy
- Federal Emergency Management Agency
- National Aeronautics and Space Administration
- North Carolina Emergency Management
- The Olson Group, Ltd.
- Virginia Department for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing
- Virginia Department of Emergency Management
- Virginia Department of Fire Programs
- Virginia Department of Health
- Virginia Department of Forestry
- Virginia Department of Transportation
- Virginia Department of Social Services
- Virginia National Guard
- Virginia State Police

## OBSERVATIONS

The 2018 FEMA National Level Exercise included over 1,000 players representing 264 participating agencies. All six states in FEMA Region III participated: VA, MD, DC, PA, DE and WV. The widespread participation allowed interaction with various organizations throughout the region. This exercise built upon lessons learned from the 2017 Atlantic Hurricane Season with a unified scenario and control environment for all exercise play. This two-week exercise truly engaged all stakeholders. Virginia's one day of play occurred three days post-landfall in the scenario, and the findings in this AAR capture such.

At the Virginia level, this exercise involved the VEOC, four RCCs, and 38 localities in response to a catastrophic hurricane making landfall in the Hampton Roads area. Pulling from recent real-world events, the scenario allowed players to take action following such a devastating blow, and this scenario encouraged localities to work together in the wake of flooding, power outages, and critical infrastructure failures. Virginia focused on three key issues: 1) strong situational awareness, ensuring efficient operational coordination to organize essential functions; 2) logistics and supply chain management, ensuring resources reached the proper destination; and 3) public information and warning, ensuring that the public was kept informed about hurricane impacts.

Overall, VDEM and the 38 participating localities accomplished these goals. From resource requests that originated at the localities and through communicating with the RCCs and then to the VEST, necessary steps and tasks were assigned to proper personnel in order for a quick and efficient recovery effort. This exercise exemplified communication across the state in order to coordinate abilities.

This exercise presented various strengths of VEST team members along with some areas that can be improved upon for future exercises and real-world response. The RCC is a new system and a current work-in-progress, but this exercise provided a strong platform to test its capabilities and present findings to solidify proper plans and procedures that should be established.

The exercise successfully captured many areas of strength and improvement that will be used to improve the VDEM response plans, policies, and procedures and develop future training and exercise efforts. These included:

- Demonstrated the ability of the VEST Command and General Staff to establish incident management and Incident Action Planning processes in response to a natural disaster that impacts the Commonwealth in accordance with the National Incident Management System (NIMS) and existing plans, policies, and procedures.
- Demonstrated the ability of the VEST Operations Section to coordinate the management of Emergency Support Function (ESF) operations in response to a natural disaster impacting the Commonwealth in accordance with existing plans, policies and procedures.
- Evaluated the ability of the VEST Logistics Section to provide facilities, services and support in response to a natural disaster that impacts the Commonwealth in accordance with established plans, policies and procedures.



- Demonstrated the ability of the Joint Information Center (JIC) to deliver coordinated, prompt and actionable incident information in response to a natural disaster that impacts the Commonwealth in accordance with existing plans, policies and procedures.

The following information highlights additional strengths observed during the exercise.

- The JIC practiced good collaboration between state agencies and VDEM, including familiarization with SOPs, organization of a Governor’s press conference, and utilizing pre-scripted messages.
- There was strong federal integration with FEMA IMAT, including information sharing in the Planning Section and the development of a joint IAP.
- VEST communication and coordination with the VDEM Chief Regional Coordinators was effective. This was the largest exercise to date testing VDEM’s regional structure.
- Strong situational awareness. ESF leads’ updates provided robust situational awareness. Continuous huddles shared information throughout incident response.
- Amateur Radio Emergency Services/Radio Amateur Civil Emergency Services (ARES/RACES) operations. Volunteers made contact with localities and radios provided as redundant communications in case other methods failed.
- Positive coordination with Regional Coordination Centers. The RCC-1 Disaster Response and Recovery Officer (DRRO) and All Hazards Planner (AHP) did an excellent job of collecting, analyzing, and processing information for intelligence gathering and then reporting the information to designated outlets. The RCC 7 SITL maintained frequent, periodic contact with local EOCs. Coordination and communication between staff in the RCC 2 was excellent. Individuals from VDEM Region 2 and 3 as well as the Liaison Officer (LNO) from the Virginia National Guard (VANG) staffed the RCC.

The following areas have been identified for improvement.

- There were some Information Technology challenges. Some players were not proficient in WebEOC. In the Virginia Emergency Operations Center (VEOC), some of the screens that had been displaying information would time out and become blank. There was also latency with WebEOC, WiFi problems, and technology infrastructure weaknesses. The WiFi in the VEOC was not reliable for the number of participants, over 200, many with multiple electronic devices, exceeding the original VEOC design parameters.
- The agency needs to develop a concept of operations for the Regional Coordination Center (RCC) plans. There are no formal written plans in place for the RCCs as they

have been experimenting with different models since the system was established last year.

- ESF 11 (Agriculture & Natural Resources) struggled to find locations, equipment, staffing, and supplies for pet sheltering that would be required in a major hurricane.