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AFTER ACTION REPORT

**San Luis Valley Digital Trunked Radio (DTR)
Tabletop
Communications Exercise
For
Costilla County and Conejos County**

**Conducted July 8, 2006 at Centennial High School, San Luis,
Colorado**

Version 1.0

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Executive Summary



The purpose of this exercise was to introduce DTR radio protocols utilizing common channels that are already programmed into all DTR radios. Participants used the Costilla Mutual Aid Channel (COSMAC), Fire agencies used the radio-to-radio Simplex 1 (SIMP 1), Law Enforcement agencies used SIMP 2 and Emergency Medical Services used SIMP 3. The SLV Exercise Design Team provided a fictional scenario where exercise participants could use

DTR radio protocols to coordinate their emergency response actions with other agencies.

To limit the complexity and scope of the exercise the San Luis Valley Exercise Design Team decided to limit the exercise to only Costilla and Conejos counties. Additionally, exercise participants were limited to American Red Cross, Fire Department, Law Enforcement agencies and Emergency Medical Services agencies.

Exercise staff members were given short-range hand held “walkie talkie” unit to communicate between themselves.

Several months before the exercise, a representative from the Motorola Corporation came to Alamosa and provide a “DTR 101” class on the general operation of the radio, how to switch channel and functions of various radio buttons and switches. The intended audience were representatives from San Luis Valley emergency response agencies. These people would return to their agencies and familiarize their co-workers with what they learned in “DTR 101”.

Before the exercise started, Jon Montano (San Luis Valley RETAC Coordinator) gave a PowerPoint presentation on the basic principals of the Incident Command System (ICS).

After Jon concluded his ICS presentation, Pam Stewart (CSP Regional Communication Manager) gave a PowerPoint presentation on DTR radio protocols.

At the beginning of the exercise, participants experience some



awkwardness with the DTR radio protocols. As is with all new technology, awkwardness was anticipated and participants quickly adjusted to the situation.

As responders received exercise injects simulating dispatch sending them to the incident scene, they were prompted to announce their arrival to the IC on the Costilla Mutual Aid Channel (COSMAC).

Once an Incident Commander was selected, the IC quickly began to assemble his command staff. His staff consisted of representatives from Law Enforcement, Fire Departments and Emergency Medical Services. The IC and his staff left the Centennial High School gymnasium and assembled aboard the Alamosa County Sheriff Incident Command Vehicle. The vehicles was located in the school parking lot. This unified command configuration provided the IC with an efficient method to coordinate activities between the three disciplines and Costilla County Sheriff Dispatch Center. At this point, exercise participants began to effectively use DTR radio protocols.

The IC followed DTR radio protocol and remained on the Costilla MAC to communicate information between himself and the Costilla County Sheriff Dispatch Center (hereafter called “dispatch”). Upon their arrival at the incident scene, other disciplines followed DTR radio protocols and communicated on the following DTR channels:

- Fire Department personnel selected Simplex Channel “1” (SIMP 1)
- Law Enforcement personnel selected SIMP 2
- Emergency Medical Service personnel selected SIMP 3

The exercise scenario grew in complexity and the participants responded to the needs of the situation as they were handed exercise injects by the Controllers. After an ammonium nitrate and fuel oil (ANFO) bomb was discovered in a vehicle, the IC called for a one mile radius evacuation and the exercise was terminated.

After the exercise concluded a debriefing or “hot wash” was conducted with all participants. Then exercise participants were asked to fill out a written critique. One of the questions was “Please rate the overall exercise on the following scale” (1 being worse and 10 being best). The average score for this question was 8.3.

Background Information

Radio communication between various emergency response disciplines has historically been poor to often non-existent. If an agency did not have the frequency of other agencies programmed into their radio, communication was not possible.

About ten years ago, several Colorado State agencies began to build the infrastructure for a Digital Trunked Radio (DTR) system. The purpose of this system was to enable local and state emergency response agencies to communicate between themselves on a statewide basis. These new DTR radios are components to a growing, statewide

communication project to provide seamless and reliable interoperable communication between emergency response agencies in locations all around the State of Colorado.

San Luis Valley officials came together in early 2003 and made a decision to join the State of Colorado DTR system.

Since late in 2004, emergency response agencies within the San Luis Valley region have been receiving DTR radios through Homeland Security grant programs. At the time of this writing, most agencies have their DTR radios, but a few agencies still have not received them.

The DTR radio system directly supports one of the State Homeland Security capabilities called “Interoperable Communications”. Aside from the nearly crystal clear voice audio on the radios, probably the most important feature is commonality of radio channel talk groups contained in all DTR radios used in the State of Colorado.

San Luis Valley emergency response agencies have been using their DTR radios on a daily basis to communicate and coordinate action with their own agency and their dispatch center. However, during emergency response actions involving multiple agencies communications between emergency responders have been hampered because of a lack of familiarity with common communication channels.

This exercise introduces a new paradigm in communication techniques for each DTR radio user to communicate with other disciplines and coordinate their activities on channels contained in all DTR radios.

Goals and Objectives

Exercise goals and objectives for the San Luis Valley Digital Trunked Radio System tabletop exercise are as follows:

Goal – Establish initial Incident Command structure and utilize communication protocols between all responding emergency response units and personnel.

Objectives

1. Within 5 minutes of arrival at a disaster or emergency scene, the senior emergency responder will assume the duties of Incident Commander and coordinate actions between first responders at the scene and Costilla County Sheriff Dispatch Center.
2. Within 5 minutes after being dispatched to a disaster or emergency scene, each emergency response unit will demonstrate their ability to follow DTR radio protocols to contact the Incident Command to receive initial instructions.

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3. Upon arrival at a disaster or emergency scene, each participant will demonstrate their ability to follow DTR radio protocols with appropriate MAC or simplex channels to contact and coordinate actions between responders of the same discipline.
4. Each participant will use the DTR radio to transmit at least two messages during the exercise.

Overall objectives for each discipline are as follows:

Fire Department

- Evaluate the process used to determine the level of response.
- Evaluate the DTR radio coordination with local Law Enforcement and Emergency Medical Services in rescue operations at the incident scene.
- Evaluate the ability to function under Incident Command System.

Law Enforcement

- Evaluate the establishment of scene security and definitive inner and outer perimeters.
- Evaluate the DTR radio coordination with Fire Department and Emergency Medical Service in rescue operations at the incident.
- Evaluate use of pre-established procedures to mobilize all necessary Law Enforcement personnel and resources.
- Evaluate the ability to function under Incident Command System

Emergency Medical Services

- Evaluate the establishment of measures necessary for medical services at the incident.
- Evaluate the DTR radio coordination with local Law Enforcement and Fire Department in rescue operations at the scene.
- Evaluate the establishment of a staging area for all responding medical equipment
- Evaluate establishment of a communication procedure for interaction with other response agencies.
- Evaluate the ability to function under Incident Command System.

Each exercise participant was given a statewide MAC channel to make contact with a representative located in the Colorado Department of Emergency Management Command Post located at the facility in Centennial, Colorado on Mutual Aid Channel 9 Southeast (M9 SE). The purpose of this activity was to demonstrate the long-range capabilities of the DTR radio system.

A number of exercise injects were developed to drive DTR radio traffic between participating agencies to give everyone practice in locating and using various common channels found in all DTR radios. As an example, a Costilla County Deputy Sheriff was given an inject that directed him to contact any Emergency Medical Service unit at the incident scene. Injects similar to the example were developed for all disciplines participating in the tabletop exercise.

Pre-Exercise Activities

Several months in advance of the exercise, representatives from the San Luis Valley Exercise Design Team contacted Centennial High School officials to discuss the possibility of using the school as the exercise site. School officials agreed and work began on which areas would be used during the exercise. The following areas of the school were used during the exercise:

Main entryway – The registration table was set up in this area.

Gymnasium – Fire, Law Enforcement, American Red Cross and EMS were located in each corner of the gym. This arrangement provided the exercise staff with visual control over the exercise participants.

Parking lot – The Incident Commander and his unified command group were located in Alamosa County Sheriff Incident Command Vehicle. From there they coordinated response efforts between dispatch and exercise participants located inside the gymnasium.

Ortega middle School was also selected because of the following reasons:

- The DTR radio signal strength was good in the area (San Luis has a new DTR tower located on a hill overlooking the town)
- Plenty of parking space for exercise staff, participants and observers.
- The school location was well known to everyone involved in the exercise

Participants and Agencies

The following agencies (in alphabetical order) and individuals were the exercise participants:

Alamosa County Sheriff

- Dave Stong
- Gary Thomas
- Ron Goodman

American Red Cross

- Danny Fox
- Vivian Gallegos (also Costilla County Public Health)
- Barbara Robbins

Blanca Police Department

- Danny Sanchez

Colorado Department of Emergency Management

- Patricia Gavelda

Carmel Fire Department

- Brian Coleman
- Jason Kreps

Conejos County Emergency Medical Service

- Rodney King (also SLV Exercise Design Team)
- Peggy Martin
- Richard Martin
- John Comstock

Costilla County Ambulance Service

- Alfred Mondragon

Costilla County Fire Department

- Cole Wakasugi
- Gary Pettigrew
- Anthony Sanchez
- Adam Chacon
- Margerite Espinoza
- Robert Vaughn

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- Leonard Quinlan

Costilla County Office of Emergency Management

- Mat Valdez

Costilla County Sheriff Department

- James Chavez
- Cruz Sote
- Ivan Garcia
- Amos Medina

Costilla County Sheriff Department Dispatch Center

- Denise Gonzales
- Tina Espinoza
- Beatrice Vigil
- Jacob Vigil

La Jara Fire Department

- Craig McCarroll
- Scott McCarroll
- Austin Valdez
- Bill Yohey

Manassa Fire Department

- Israel Rivera
- Jacob Ortiz
- Denny Fringer
- Richard Martin
- Tim King
- Nicholas Anderson
- John Comstock

Monte Vista Fire Department

- John Plane

Montezuma County Office of Emergency Management

- Lori Johnson

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Sanford Fire Department

- Ruben Mandril

San Luis Police Department

- Greg Brown

Romeo Fire Department

- Anthony Martinez

Colorado State Patrol Alamosa Regional Dispatch Center

- Mike Hagaman
- Kenric Holman
- Donna Goodwin
- Cameron Decker

Conejos County emergency Medical Service

- Coleen Martin

Conejos County Sheriff

- Joe Taylor
- Justin Harlan
- Lucas Sowards
- Marcos Naranjo
- Chris Crown

Manassa Fire Department

- John Comstock

Mosca-Hooper Fire Department

- Blaine Witherspoon
- Glen Buxkemper

La Jara Fire Department

- Tom Salazar

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The following Exercise Team members, with their exercise positions, were present during the exercise:

Pete Magee – Exercise Director and Senior Controller

Rodney King – Registration Desk

Pam Stewart – Controller for the Costilla County Sheriff Dispatch Center

Duane Oaks – Evaluator for Costilla County Sheriff Dispatch Center

Dave Pote – Controller for Law Enforcement

Jeff Babcock – Evaluator for Law Enforcement

Don Chapman – Evaluator for Incident Command

Dave Stong – Controller for Incident Command

Merlinda Lopez – Controller for Emergency Medical Services

Jon Montano – Evaluator for Emergency Medical Services

Sam Riggerbach – Evaluator for Fire Departments

Patricia Gavalda – Controller for Fire Departments

Description of the Exercise Scenario

The exercise scenario starts with a two-vehicle accident in Costilla County at the intersection of Highway 142 and the bridge over the Rio Grande River. The scenario builds in complexity, requiring participants to coordinate activities with their DTR radios.

1. Citizen passing by calls 911 on cell phone to report accident (does not report any injuries, just two car accident).
2. A 14-passenger van full of senior citizens traveling East on Highway 142 collides with a bulk fuel truck traveling west on Highway 142 at a high rate of speed.
3. Wind is blowing steady from the Southwest at 10 miles per hours. Sky is clear with scattered clouds.
4. The bulk fuel truck wanders into the oncoming lane, hits the 14-pax van and comes to rest against the North side of the bridge, partially in the Rio Grand River. The HazMat placard on the side of the truck reads “1993” for diesel fuel oil.
5. Diesel fuel oil leaks into the Rio Grande River. No fire.
6. The fuel truck driver is injured and trapped in his truck.
7. The 14-passenger van is full of senior citizens, some are injured, and one is dead.

8. Smoke and flame comes out of the engine area and diesel fuel begins to leak from the rear of the truck at a rate of three gallons per minute.
9. Costilla County Fire Department, EMS and Costilla County Sheriff Deputy arrives
10. Law Enforcement stops traffic in both directions on Highway 142 and decides on which detour is best.
11. One of the stopped vehicles is an older Volkswagen mini-bus covered with anti-war slogans and one occupant.
12. Conejos County EMS, Sheriff and several Fire Departments are called for mutual aid assistance.
13. Diesel fuel oil continues to leak into the Rio Grande River.
14. Newspaper reporters from the Valley Courier and Pueblo Chieftain arrive and want information.
15. The San Luis Town Marshall starts to talk to the driver of the VW mini-bus because he appears very nervous; the Deputy grows suspicious of the driver when he smells fertilizer and fuel oil odor and sees an AK-47 partially covered by a coat.
16. The driver hits the marshal with the truck door, knocking him down and starts running east on Highway 142.
17. The marshal thinks the VW mini-bus contains ammonium nitrate bombs.

The Incident Commander calls Costilla County Sheriff Dispatch for a bomb squad to evaluate the VW mini-bus.

Accomplishments and Shortfalls

Accomplishments

Exercise goals and objectives were all accomplished within the allotted time.

According to Jack Cobb, Communications Manager, Colorado Department of Emergency Management in Centennial, CO approximately 15 exercise participants had an opportunity to make radio checks using their portable DTR radios. Participants were given an inject slip which instructed them to select “M9SE” (State-wide Mutual Aid Channel 9 South East) and asked to make a radio check with Denver area CDEM personnel. This gave the DTR radio users a sense of how powerful even the small portable DTR radios were. Most users were impressed and came away with a new sense of confidence in their equipment.

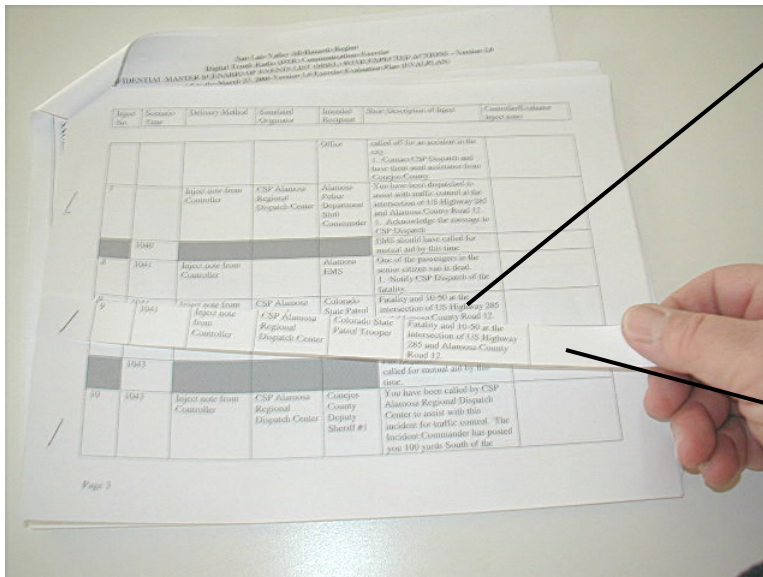
Controllers handed written “injects” from the Master Scenario of Events Listing (MSEL) to exercise participants at pre-selected times. There were actually two versions of the MSEL. One version was the standard MSEL with a description of each inject. The second MSEL version contained all the same information plus expected or anticipated actions on the part of the exercise participants.

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Each time a Controller passed an inject to an exercise participant, the Controller announced the inject number on their “walkie talkie” radios. Even though there were only a few minutes between injects, this procedure helped all Controllers stay on time with exercise injects.

Controllers cut the first MSEL version into paper strips, each strip containing one inject. These strips were then stapled to the second MSEL version. At the designated time, the Controller simply pulled off the inject and handed it to an exercise participant. Since the Controller still had the second MSEL version in his hand, it was intended to keep track of which injects had been handed out and which had not. This photo shows how this process was managed:

Injects to Fire Department personnel should have been passed earlier in the exercise. The early stages of the scenario suggested that Fire Department personnel should have been notified and required to respond. This was not a matter of timing or response by exercise participants, rather a problem created by the scenario and the MSEL.



This area of MSEL contains the inject information along with the expected action on the part of the recipient.

This slip of paper is the actual inject that the Controller handed to each recipient.

Shortfalls

The first public safety individual on the scene was a Costilla County Deputy, as scripted in the scenario. However, even though an overview of Incident Command System was presented before the exercise, the deputy did not immediately assume the role of Incident Commander. After several prompts, he did take on the role and the exercise progressed in accordance with the scenario.

Our DTR radio protocols call for operations personnel in Fire, EMS and Law Enforcement to go to their respective Simplex channel. When the incident grows to the point where, as an example, numerous Fire Department agencies are engaged with the incident simultaneously, the Fire Department representative with the IC can not

effectively control nor monitor DTR traffic from multiple agencies. This was the case during the exercise. John Plane, our evaluator for Fire, suggested each agency provide a representative to stay with the IC and have each Fire Department agencies use their assigned TAC channel. This allows fire fighters from each agency to coordinate their actions with one of their Fire Department officers located near the IC. This is essentially an expanded unified command structure.

Red Cross personnel were not able to communicate with their cell phones and their pagers did not work in the San Luis area. They were not aware of this problem, but will consider this communications problem for future exercises or actual responses in this geographical area. This points to the need for radio caches to be maintained at county sheriff department and perhaps the future regional Emergency Operations Center above the Alamosa County Services Building at 8900 Independence Way, Alamosa, CO.

Also, Red Cross should have injects to respond to, such as how they will arrange shelter and feeding of citizens who are unexpectedly evacuated from an incident scene. This will also drive a requirement for the IC to request transportation for evacuees.

Many of the exercise participants were not familiar with their DTR radios (buttons, switches, etc.) This was especially true of the smaller volunteer fire departments. Motorola (the manufacturer of the DTR radios) has held two “train-the-trainer” seminars on how to use the XTL2500 radio. These seminars were lightly attended. The intent was for the attendees to travel back to their agencies to conduct “DTR 101” training to their colleagues. That has not happened to the level hoped for.

When exercise participants of each discipline communicated with their peers on SIMPLEX channels, the close proximity of everyone in the gymnasium caused annoying cross talk between the SIMPLEX channels.

From an exercise administrative standpoint, we intend to mail out RSVPs to intended participants. In the mailing will be a stamped return RSVP card for each participant to mail back to the exercise team. We will also be more aggressive in getting agency heads to exercise planning meetings.

San Luis Valley Exercise Design Team Comments

From Pete Magee (Exercise Director and Senior Controller)

Objective 1 – Pam Stewart, who was in Costilla County Sheriff Dispatch Center, said they did not know who the Incident Commander was during the exercise. An IC did emerge, albeit late into the exercise.

Instead of using only the SIMPLEX channels, use agency specific channels. Each agency would provide a representative to remain with the IC in a Unified Command structure.

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There was a lack of clear communication regarding the appropriate channel or talk group. Agencies should identify their channel at the time a page is sent out.

Pam Stewart underscored the need to use the DTR protocols when an agency is paged by a dispatch center.

Objective 2 – Due to participants unfamiliarity with the actual use of the DTR radios, there was confusion on how they operate, how to find channels, etc. There appeared to be a lot of confusion when it came to using the “scan” mode.

Objective 3 – The close proximity of all exercise participants inside the gymnasium caused some “bleed over” between SIMPLEX channels.

Objective 4 – Not sure if everyone had a chance to use the radio.

During the “hot wash” after exercise debriefing, few of the exercise participants made comments. Most of the talking during this period came from exercise controllers and evaluators.

There was trouble with multiple agencies trying to contact the IC simultaneously. The term “go ahead” response was not clear as to who had the clearance.

From Danny Fox (SLV Chapter American Red Cross Emergency Services Director

Here are my thoughts, as far as my agency participation and interaction:

My ladies did get to participate, by my winging it because the exercise itself, we could not be contacted. Our cell phones and pagers did not work in the San Luis town area. So we worked off of the scenarios in an indirect manner. They did reasonably well and I am proud of my Red Cross Volunteers. However, this did surely show that we had no communications in the San Luis area, an issue for us to deal with in the future. Maybe we really do need to be a bigger part of the DTR system. In future exercises I suggest that perhaps a controller can be asked if an alternate method of communication can be used at times during the exercise, just to make sure everyone is playing. We did get to work on the response, just not the way we all had originally planned.

From Pam Stewart (Controller for Costilla County Sheriff Dispatch Center

The IC did not check in with Costilla County Sheriff Dispatch Center and identify himself.

Several of the agencies responding tried to check in with dispatch on the designated channel for their discipline. The dispatch center stayed on the Costilla Law channel where they should have been, but agencies toing en route did not go en route with dispatch on the primary channel.

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Nothing to do with Costilla County Sheriff Dispatch Center, but we need to make sure that all agency heads for the disciplines are notified in person so we know they have received the information.

Costilla County Sheriff Dispatch Center did not keep track of anyone they sent to the scene, times or call signs.

Costilla County Sheriff Dispatch Center only has the capability to listen to one channel on the base station. They frequently would switch back and forth so they could get an idea what was going on. They did have a portable DTR radio, but kept changing channels to attempt to hear more information.

The IC did not feed Costilla County Sheriff Dispatch Center any information.

Costilla County Sheriff Dispatch Center tried several times to contact the IC and was unable to establish contact. Not sure what channel everyone was on.

Costilla County Sheriff Dispatch Center was very knowledgeable as to who to call out and where the numbers were. I thought they did a great job of contacting everyone. They just need to keep track of who has been requested and who responded and what time. They need to have some type of log.

It went slightly more smoothly for Costilla County Sheriff Dispatch Center than CSP Alamosa Regional Communications Center because Costilla only has one dispatch channel so it forces the agencies to find a common channel so they can communicate. CSP monitors all channels so we were able to monitor all the chaos.

Overall, I think it went smoothly and I hope all agencies learned from the exercise. I am looking forward to the next exercise. CSP HazMat has requested to participate in the next one.

From Rodney King (Conejos County Emergency Manager and EMS Manager)

I thought the exercise went well. We need to include the Alamosa County Sheriff Incident Command vehicle again. We need to confirm that everyone who should be invited and they intend to attend. We also need to insure all exercise participants bring their DTR radio to our DTR radio exercises.

From Jon Montano

The exercise went well. It would have been better if more EMS personnel from Costilla County would have attended the exercise.

From Don Chapman (Incident Command Vehicle Evaluator)

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I think overall things went well. The communications went well, I think. Lack of Incident Command System was the main thing that I noticed.

From Jeff Babcock

Provide maps, layout, pictures, and etc., so participants have a better overall scene awareness.

Reinforce to emergency responders the need to use county MAC channels as the default channel to report into an Incident Commander. Make dispatch center aware of this need.

Summary of the “Hot Wash” debriefing

Exercise participants were, for the most part, very pleased with the chance to use their DTR radios in a coordinated fashion. This has been a point of frustration for many emergency responders.

Exercise participants were asked to complete an eight question critique form. We received 18 critiques. Participants were asked the question, “Please rate the overall exercise on the following scale [1 being least and 10 being best] and the participants gave the exercise an average rating of 8.3, which shows they were fairly well pleased.

Additional written comments from exercise participants follow:

“This kind of training is needed with [the new DTR radios]. More than just one training event is needed to achieve familiarity.”

“I enjoyed the exercise and learned a little more about the DTR radio and helping out on a situation like this if I need to go out on an actual incident.”

“I need to work with my DTR radio more to understand all it will do.”

“Do this again and again!”

Recommendations

Training needs

Emergency responders need more Incident Command System training. This is especially true for those who will have a leadership role during emergencies or disasters.

Conduct more DTR radio exercises around the San Luis Valley. Expose as many emergency responders to the DTR radio protocols as possible.

Emergency responder agencies should include DTR radio training and use of the protocols during period in-service training sessions.

Anyone who would have a role during emergencies or disaster should attend the National Incident Management System (NIMS) training. This is currently taking place around the San Luis Valley, but not all responders have attended this training.

Changes in the Emergency Plan

County Emergency Managers should consider adding the DTR radio protocols to their County Emergency Plans.