

Drill tests response to hazardous material on Tahoe beach

By Austin Fay

Plumes of smoke wafted across the decontamination zone at Regan Beach.

Mike Mileski, medical group supervisor for South Lake Tahoe Fire Department was coordinating radio traffic when a plume of the nerve agent crossed his path, causing his ranking sergeant to inform him his skin was itchy and he had to lay on the ground and wait for his teammate Sophie Tetlow to provide medical attention. The radio and clipboard he was in charge was passed on to the next in command.

Placing the decontamination zone so close to the hot zone was one of the many lessons learned during the multi-agency hazardous materials drill on June 28.



Hazmat drill in South Tahoe includes all the gear and a decontamination center. Photos/Austin Fay

If the situation were real, this mistake would have put the entire operation at risk.

It's been almost two years since there was a hazmat exercise in South Lake Tahoe. The goal is to have an exercise annually for personnel in the region to be adequately prepared to isolate and decontaminate victims of a hazardous material incident.

Briefing at the SLTFD headquarters focused on communication safety and accuracy as objectives. Many people who spoke to Lake Tahoe News justified bumps in the road as a result of it being a training exercise.

Fire trucks and ambulances arrived at the section of the beach that was blocked off, while medics in the fire department assessed victims and took control of the scripted situation.

A troupe of 26 actors in makeup was hired, complete with a distraught mother and a belligerent eager-to-help drunk.

Four actors were sent to Barton Memorial Hospital as part of a decontamination exercise. One went by ambulance, the other three were walk-ins reporting exposure to the nerve agent.

One actor "died" from a heart attack that went untreated approximately an hour after the exercise started.

Five agencies took part in the exercise: South Lake Tahoe Fire Department, Lake Valley Fire Department, Barton Memorial Hospital, El Dorado County and the Army National Guard Civil Support Team. A real hazardous materials case is nearly always multi-jurisdictional, with civilian and national entities collaborating.

The risk of something like what was simulated Monday morning is low, but "the potential is there, but very minimal," Marty Scheuerman, SLT division chief said. The chance of a terrorist attack or situation where hazardous material might be present

is slight, but merits preparing for the situation.

“Luckily, Tahoe isn’t a huge destination for lots of nasty stuff on trucks, where something like this might happen. It’s mostly consumer goods,” Scheuerman said.

Scheuerman draws on 33 years of hazardous material responder experience in the region and cites the 2007 Angora Fire as a valuable lesson in emergency response.

“There was a need for cooperation during that fire to create a unified command to draw all the agencies and participants under one roof,” Scheuerman said.

Hazardous material was simulated as a blue cooler emitting a plume of white smoke. The smoke, as well as the “injuries,” was in line with an organic phosphate poisoning, or nerve gas. Traffic was reduced to one lane in the Reagan Beach parking lot, while the grassy area on the west end was taped off, designating it the “hot zone.”

“It looks as though the drill’s moving along as planned and we’re learning as we go,” Mark Moss, of the El Dorado County hazmat team, said.

Tahoe-Douglas Fire Protection District response system is the greatest help and fastest responders as they have more resources to deal with a hazardous material situation, officials said.

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