

The 911 dispatchers in Austin Texas began receiving 911 calls in the early morning hours from commuters traveling along a major U.S. highway running through the city. The callers described a tanker with “green smoke” coming from the top. The fire department dispatched a full hazardous materials alarm compliment to the scene along with police and EMS. Upon arrival, the first in companies saw they had a large chlorine tanker leaking from the top.

The fire department immediately set up a hot zone and began evacuation of down wind structures including densely populated residential areas as well as commercial businesses near the highway.

The hazardous material team immediately began area monitoring operations as well as preparing a team to perform a reconnaissance entry into the hot zone.

Once a hot zone was set up using standard reference guides, the fire department requested a unified command post with fire, police, EMS, state department of transportation and the state department of public safety.

After downwind monitoring had been accomplished, law enforcement agencies were briefed and they began evacuation procedures beyond the initial hot zone.

Seeing that this was sizing up to possibly be an event that would cover a least one 12 hour operational period, the fire department activated the city/county Emergency Operations Center (EOC) and began requesting resources that were, or possibly may be needed.

The command structure was set up using the national incident management system protocol and a mobile command post was dispatched to the scene to support command and research capabilities.

After using a software plume modeling program to further develop the evacuation perimeters, command developed a public information statement and requested that EOC initiate a public service broadcast giving instructions to the public through radio and television media. Command also communicated the location of the public information briefing location to all public media organizations.

Command initiated call back of off duty hazardous materials technicians after reconnaissance showed that the chlorine relief valve was functioning as it should and that the continuing loss of the product could be predicted.

A logistical support plan was developed for the different agencies involved. This was crucial for support of the hazardous materials team in regard to technical monitor support, research, and personnel protective equipment.

Formal contacts were made with the owner of the tanker and data related to the cargo was obtained. At this time a private contractor with chlorine tanker expertise was contacted and requested to respond.

The fire department hazardous materials branch officer developed a plan to move the tanker approximately one mile to the sight of a city owned property. This was coordinated through the command post where law enforcement expanded the traffic control perimeter and fire/hazmat recalculated the plume model changes created by the moving of the tanker.

A hazardous material technician with experience driving semi-trucks was briefed and the vehicle was moved to the designated area — after coordinating with law enforcement and insuring that the site where the vehicle was being moved was evacuated.

The media release of this move was coordinated through the EOC.

In the following hours, unified command developed a plan to continue long range monitoring with call back personnel using ATV's. A fully functional rehab area was set up to support all personnel and a fire department shift rotation was planned and executed through the fire department representative in the EOC.

The state environmental regulatory agency was notified and worked within the Unified command structure through the EOC.

The chlorine tanker continued to vent and the fire/hazmat team continued monitoring. The decisions regarding the re-opening of roads, highways and neighborhoods were constantly reviewed.

Using the NIMS model and taking full advantage of the unified command structure, several options for mitigation were discussed and an action plan was developed.

The action plan developed required the off loading of the leaking tanker into another tanker provided by the owner.

The fire department set up cooling operations for the tankers to expedite the off load and developed a relief and rotation plan for companies.

The plan for the re-occupation of neighborhoods and the re-opening of roads, highways and businesses was developed using constant input of monitoring data from hazardous material team members.

The incident carried into a third operational period using resources from local, county and state agencies. This incident was carried out with no injuries to citizens and responders by using a step by step approach. This was made possible by area pre-planning, multi-agency training, and adherence to the unified command system.

What began as what seemed to be a standard hazardous material alarm became an incident where thousands of citizens were affected, around one hundred responders were utilized, and multiple local and state agencies were involved. Without a well-planned response set up by these agencies, a larger disaster would have erupted and chaos would have overtaken the scene. It is important that you – as a first responder – understand and support your departments, local, state and even national agencies plan for large disaster response.

Street Story Contributor:

Captain Mark McAdams

Fire Department Special Operations Battalion

Austin, TX