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—Kelly Cook, TCEQ Director of Critical Infrastructure

# BIG CHANGES COMING TO TCEQ’S EMERGENCY RESPONSE STRUCTURE

## *New Disaster Response Strike Teams Will Be Based in Regions and Directed by Regions*

**B**ig changes will be taking place in the TCEQ’s emergency management structure shortly before this year’s hurricane season starts up. But don’t worry, said Kelly Cook, director of the Critical Infrastructure Division. “We’re ready right now in the event something happens that calls for a major emergency response,” he said. “But we are looking for efficiencies in our Strike Team concept, looking at applying lessons learned over the past few years, and looking to grow our current institutional knowledge and experience, while also providing succession planning.

“We want to make sure we have a robust system for large-scale disaster responses, based within the TCEQ’s regional structure, that will automatically re-populate with qualified, trained team members as the more tenured staff move on or retire. We’re looking at a system that can support multiple emergency responses, as well as long-term responses, should that become necessary.”

Although a final name for the new organization has not been decided upon, Cook said it will probably retain “Strike Team” as part of its name. “The TCEQ Strike Team has earned a lot of respect over the years, from the public, from state agencies and local governments, and from federal organizations like the Coast Guard and EPA,” he said. “The Strike Team name carries a lot of equity, built up through successful responses to numerous emergencies over the years.”

### **A New, Region-Based System**

Cook said that the new disaster response strike teams will be based in the regional offices, and



TCEQ photos



Top: Response to Hurricane Ike, 2008.

Bottom: Response to train derailment in Cameron, 2008.



Response to Helotes mulch fire, 2006–2007.

will report to the regional directors and area directors. “It will be up to regional and area directors as to the exact makeup and size of their strike teams. However, we would expect the coastal areas and regions with larger populations to have bigger teams.”

### Added Flexibility

By having the strike teams made up of regional staff, all necessary disciplines can be incorporated to respond to a particular event. For instance, in addition to including members trained in hazmat and Incident Command System, the teams will also incorporate experts in wastewater, public drinking water, waste and debris management, and other areas.

Another advantage of the new system is that instead of one team, there will now be a team in each of the TCEQ’s 16 regions—or, in the case of some of our smaller regions, a combined team, Cook said. This way, the workload can be spread out when the emergencies last longer than a few days. “For instance, imagine

a heavy rainfall and flooding event in South Texas, an event that would go on for several weeks,” Cook said. “After the first week or so, the Region 15 disaster response strike team can take a break, and another team—say, from Corpus Christi—can move into place and take over.” The same flexibility would also allow the TCEQ to respond efficiently to more than one emergency at a time, he said.

And, said Cook, regions will always be able to borrow needed expertise from other teams.

### New Organizational Structure

These regional teams will report to the regional directors, but Austin will still have a role in the emergency management system, Cook said. An emergency management coordinator, reporting to the Critical Infrastructure Division, will be hired, and the coordinator will participate

in the hiring of two emergency response liaisons. The coordinator and liaisons will have a crucial role in the system.

“The liaisons will work closely with all the teams, helping to make sure they receive the proper training and certifications, organizing and conducting drills, and providing support during actual disasters.

“They will move the disaster response equipment around the state when appropriate, and make sure that everyone is familiar with the instruments, and that the instruments are properly maintained and calibrated. And that includes additional analytical and monitoring equipment and communications gear, which may come in handy for day-to-day operations in the regions.” Some resources, such as the Mobile Command Trailer, will be based primarily in Austin, but may also move around the state for training.



Mobile Command Post Trailer, and (inset) interior.

TCEQ photos

Many changes in emergency management are already occurring at the state and federal levels and the liaisons will be responsible for making sure those changes are realized and incorporated within the regional teams.

### Outlook: Better Service

“This is a big change, but change is good, and by moving more of the responsibility and control to the regions, we will provide better service to the people of Texas during emergencies,” Cook said. “And as we have seen in past emergencies, the TCEQ really has 2,700 emergency responders. Time and time again, the people of this agency have provided tireless service in time of need, and we know this will always be the case.” 🇺🇸



TCEQ photo

Response to Hurricane Katrina, 2005.



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