



TRANSCRIPT FROM WEBCAST 3/22/2011

DESCRIPTION: City Of LA Fire Department

WHO: Chief Bob Cramer (Ret.)

City Of LA Fire Department

So Chief Cramer, thank you very much again for joining us. I wanted to talk to you specifically because you've been a leading voice in advocating for this type of capability. And then you helped to lead this and get other pilot efforts done here so why? I mean what were you dealing with before that made you want this so badly?

>> Well, it is and it was a passion of mine. And it's very simple. I'm gonna go back in time a little bit to the genesis of the idea if you can bear with me. So, we're talking a time period of 1998-99. And at the time I was a hazardous materials task force commander, in fact, stationed at Fire Station 4 which we're next door to today. We had heightened awareness of the potential threat to the country from terrorists and their intent to harm us. We had been doing training on that exact topic. And we were also aware of the fact that indeed there was a site here in Los Angeles that had been targeted, Los Angeles World Airport, otherwise known as LAX to most people. So, one night it was after midnight we received an alarm to the airport for what was reported to be a radiation incident so we went out there. I'll make this long story short. Suffice to say, we send an entry team in to get a reading on whatever this was in what had to be the worst possible condition. They were outside. It was night. There was no lighting. They were under the prop warships, 747 cargo planes that were continuing to dock and unload their cargo. And they misread their instruments. And I'll be honest with you, in the retrospective looking at that, how could they not, we put them in impossible conditions. They were looking at the meters through. There was no lighting to speak of. Anyway, long--short of it is from that moment forward I had an interest in finding a way that we could transmit the readings from those handheld instruments back to our apparatus where somebody who's sitting under fluorescent lights with air conditioning can look at the computer screen and say "Now, your reading is this. You're fine." I heard someone mentioned earlier and I think it was you John that, you know, it's surprising that we don't have this already. Well, I was surprised that none of the manufacturers of the instrumentation that was available to the fire service at the time offered that capability. We will transmit it back to you. Well, there was one but it wasn't available, broad base. We had a number of manufacturers that we're having to deal with. So, one day I was reading some literature and came across an advertisement for somebody who was doing that on site for fixed facilities. That led to the introduction to David Lamensdorf who was the brains behind all of this effort. And I told him one day I'm looking to do this. I'm looking to have this capability across a broad spectrum of instrumentation both gas detectors, radiation



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detectors, others. And that began the process. I'd be quite blunt. Had we had to have done this with just the Los Angeles City Fire Department budget we never would have accomplished it. I mean that's the reality. So, happy circumstance would have it that we're well involved in Homeland Security grants at the time and we were trying to boost our capability using that grant funding. So, we had an opportunity [inaudible] danger so we took the shot at it and now we are on many, many years and over a decade later. And the way this had evolved and expanded and grown in capability is just amazing to me.

>> It's very, very encouraging. I will say this though that I think we've just scratched the surface. I think that putting these instruments in the hands of hazardous materials responders in the immediate increase in their safety that they get. It's very obvious. The first time you have a responder go into even at a drill. You put him in a suit. They're looking through a couple of layers of plastic trying to read. And as soon as they understand the concept, they immediately understand what a big increase in their personal safety this has given. And the fact that we can now interoperate with other agencies was a natural outgrowth of that capability. We wanted to be able to push it out to the net and share it with emergency managers, places like our Emergency Operations Center, natural outgrowth. But when I say we just scratched the surface, I happen to know that there are private entities out there that have suites of sensors already in place that would love to be able to share their readings with us. So I see this expanding further even though we have accomplished, I think, all the goals we had for this project. That's a little bit more than the history, sorry, but that's my perspective as well.

>> And I think there were a lot of policy barriers that you had to overcome to be able to share that data, that information.

>> It was, first of all, I needed to note that within the fire service, what should be understandable reason is there is a reluctance to adopt brand new technology. We used our equipment and our systems under conditions that are very threatening to our people. So, new technology, version one of anything usually comes with hiccups. And most often, you really can't afford to have that hiccup at the scene of emergency. So understandably, there is a cultural bias against things new. So, it was not just policy. We had to overcome--



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>> Comfort level with the stuff you've been dealing, been working with.

>> Yes, yes, exactly. And this was very, very new. And so, there were a lot of growing pains, a lot of pain. Fortunately, I had some enlightened leadership back then. In fact, I think you're gonna be talking to retired Battalion Chief Robert Rose a little bit later. And he was in charge of our hazmat program at the time and fully supported us. On up through the chain of command, we did get support but I will tell you that at every level it was a challenge to begin with. But as more and more, the capability surfaced. It was very quickly that emergency managers recognized the capability that it gave them and it was critical. So, as soon as we demoed, as soon as we had an incident where we showed what was happening, it was very easy to overcome any policy challenges. We got support for that.

>> That's great. And it's also my understanding that you really pushed to have those standards put into your procurement request for use of your grant fund.

>> Yes. There was a point in time when enough of the hazardous materials response teams in this area that were all party to the grants were in the process of adopting this system. So it reached a watershed point where there was no longer any question about the need to have this. We had answered that question. Now, what we wanted to establish was that within this region, if you're going to partake of the grant money to acquire hazardous materials equipment, then this system is gonna be part of it. And so that, I did, I stood up at one of the meetings and sit at that. And fortunately, I had the support of the major response agencies, the sheriff's department, county fire department, et cetera. And everyone nod their head and agreed that yes, this is a way to go.

>> Standards are so, so critical mainly in the Department of Homeland Security Science and Technology Directorate. I mean what we do is we work with folks like you and with the operational components of DHS to try to find out what it is that you guys need out here in the field. And so, you'll tell us, you know, I need a widget that does this or I need a way that I could do that, or I need to be able to do this and we just don't have this capability. Or this thing doesn't work with that thing. And so, we will go out to universities and laboratories and out to industry partners and try to find out who is working on



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something that will help us get there to answer this problem for you. And if there is nobody out there working, you know, then we go to the universities and laboratories and say, hey, you know, from scratch, let's get the science and start working this way up. But more and more that we find that a lot of things could be addressed just as there were standards in place. And so, that's where we're doing a lot of work in that direction now is to try to help to have standards established for a variety of equipment so that we can make sure that when you go out to purchase equipment for your department, that you know that has met a certain thing and that it will help, it will work together of the things that you already have.

>> As I said earlier, you just can't but new infrastructure.

>> Well, that's absolutely critical. And in the early stages, and quite frankly, this surfaced as an issue for us very early on. Before Science and Technology Directorate approached this region to find out if we wanted to participate in this project, what we were finding was with the manufacturing, it's a very understandable reluctance to open their equipment up to allow us to attach devices and transmit their readings. I understood that at the time. So that had to be overcome. Fortunately, there was other people that had to do that work but it was a challenge and we have some manufacturers who initially told us no, we're not gonna do that. They've since come around to our way of thinking. They've seen the benefit and for the most part, when you show someone on either the emergency response side or the manufacturer of a piece of equipment, what the benefit is, it quickly overcomes objections. So, but it was. It was initially an issue for us and there were standards subsequently promulgated through the project that had benefitted this system greatly. Yes.

>> And I'm actually seeing on a couple of websites some of the detection technologies out there have actually adopted the entire process. So it's really great to see that change in thinking from the vendors as well.

>> Great. Thank you very much, chief. Greatly appreciate your taking the time to chat with us.



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>> My pleasure.

>> Is there anything else that we didn't give you a chance to say?

>> No, other than the fact that this is really a critical point. And I believe that from here going forward, seeing this expand to other agencies throughout the United States is very encouraging to me. I understand, I heard today that there are some major metropolitan areas that have adopted this technology or are in the process of doing so. That's very encouraging. I think it's been validated. Its value to the emergency responder is clear and I think its value to emergency managers is also as clear.

>> And I just wanted to personally thank you for all your support and being a champion when we came in and started working with you. I think your vision has really been essential in making this program a success. And I just wanna thank you for all of the support you have given us and being part of it as well.

>> My pleasure.

>> Thank you again. I appreciate it.

>> I understand you recently retired?

>> I've been retired for almost a year now enjoying myself but staying in touch with this. I've been watching the progress of the program.

>> Congratulations. Well, you can't let go for this is kind of your child in a way.