

CASE STUDY FOR SISKIYOU COUNTY

Siskiyou County Runs Simultaneous Evacuations for Multiple 2023 Wildfires in Happy Camp Complex

Situation

With a size greater than the San Francisco Bay Area, Siskiyou County is a large (6,377 mi²) rural county in Northern California with a population of just over 44,000. Much of the county is mountainous and highly forested with areas that are difficult to access. There are multiple small, remote communities, plus three larger population centers — the cities of Yreka, Mount Shasta, and Weed.

Over recent years, extreme weather and lightning strikes have made Siskiyou County, like many of its sister counties, **highly susceptible to wildfires**. During the last four fire seasons (2020 to 2023), Siskiyou County had the incredibly challenging job of managing multiple evacuations simultaneously within county lines.

Problem

Most recently during the 2023 wildfire season, the Happy Camp Complex of fires burned over 21,725 acres in the Klamath National Forest and Happy Camp Ranger District **requiring multiple evacuation warnings** to be issued over a 76-day period. This followed the geographically separate McKinney, Alex and Yeti fires that burned over 67,000 acres in 2022.

During the first hours of an evacuation communication, traffic control, and shelter operations are mission critical and very time sensitive. In 2020, Siskiyou County did not have well-established evacuation pre-planning in place before fire incidents occurred. As a result, evacuation areas had to be defined on-the-fly, making it difficult to understand how many people are affected and where and when they need to go. Communication challenges and delays are endemic when using ad-hoc geographic boundaries of areas to alert the public and coordinate evacuations. These boundaries and orders are extremely difficult to describe and share. This difficulty is compounded when larger incidents transition to an extended attack, incident management teams are included, and mutual aid partners without area familiarity join the response.

Siskiyou County officials had to spend critical hours to define evacuation areas, determine how many people were affected, and decide where they needed to go. This led to monumental changes during the next two, widespread, devastating fire seasons in 2021 and 2022.



Solution

Following the 2020 fire season, Siskiyou County Office of Emergency Services (SCOES) deployed Genasys Protect in anticipation of future fire seasons where fires could potentially start in remote locations causing the need for evacuations.

In June 2021, the Genasys team, working with the federal incident management team assigned to the River Complex, assisted SCOES in using their solution. SCOES saw the immediate benefit of communicating with pre-established zone boundaries based on zone numbers instead of complicated, geographic descriptions. Understanding the zone populations and being able to quickly add and share road closure and shelter locations provided additional value to the County.

Having a single platform provided an accurate up-to-date operating picture of the areas affected was a game changer. Throughout the rest of the fire season, SCOES continued to use Genasys Protect, and all incoming incident management teams were made familiar with the use of Genasys Protect which greatly simplified the coordination of evacuations.

Results

Extreme fire conditions in Siskiyou County have led to tens of thousands of additional acres being burned in the ensuing fire seasons. With Genasys Protect's zone structure fully implemented and using the Genasys Protect pre-planning repository, evacuations throughout the county run much easier, allowing personnel to focus on other aspects of incident response. Officials are also able to model a fire's behavior and determine the number of people and structures to evacuate. With a well-defined plan and effective tools for implementing that plan, the public and the local media are quickly notified through the public-facing Genasys Protect app, ensuring that people knew where to go for shelter and safety.

In 2021, Siskiyou County officials managed three fires and their respective evacuations simultaneously. When asked how they managed this complex situation, Adam Heilman at SCOES said, "It's actually pretty easy because you're working with a single platform and the way that we have our zones set up, the ability to identify areas by zone, has completely revolutionized the ability for us to communicate amongst the public safety responders as well as the public."

Clear, targeted communication was especially helpful coordinating repopulation and getting people back into their homes more quickly. Law Enforcement personnel from the County Sheriff's Office and the Yreka Police Department could quickly inform mutual aid responders, agencies, and the public across the county about changes to evacuation orders through a common operating picture.



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