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## REGIONAL HAZARDOUS MATERIALS RESPONSE TEAMS

A network of regional, specialized Level A hazmat teams responds to releases of hazardous substances in industrial or transportation accidents or other incidents throughout Wisconsin. Because most Wisconsin communities are served by volunteer or part-time fire departments that cannot maintain specialized Level A teams, the Department of Military Affairs' Division of Emergency Management contracts with ten municipal fire departments to provide regional coverage for incidents requiring the highest level of skin and respiratory protection. In fiscal year (FY) 2000-01, the State provided \$1.4 million in general purpose revenue (GPR) for contracts with the regional Level A teams.

The State also encourages counties to contract with local fire departments or other entities for county-wide response to incidents that are less serious than those requiring Level A protective equipment, but that still exceed the capabilities of smaller fire departments. The State provides GPR-funded matching equipment grants of up to \$10,000 annually, which totaled \$457,801 in FY 2000-01, to counties that plan for responding to such county-wide Level B incidents.

### Regional Level A Teams Are Well-established

The current regional Level A teams are operated by the fire departments in Appleton, Chippewa Falls, Eau Claire, La Crosse, Madison, Milwaukee, Oshkosh, Racine, Superior, and Wausau. From January 1996 through December 2000, these teams responded to 146 incidents throughout the state, or an average of about 29 incidents per year. However, the number of responses has declined each year from 1996 through 2001.

While regional Level A teams are well-established, some county-wide Level B teams are still under development. As of May 2001, eight counties had not determined who would respond to incidents requiring Level B protective equipment within their borders. An additional 8 counties were in the planning process for developing county-wide Level B coverage, while 56 counties had identified one or more local fire departments or a private contractor to respond to Level B incidents within their borders.

### Wisconsin's Hazmat Expenditures Are Higher than Other States'

From FY 1998-99 through FY 2000-01, the Division of Emergency Management spent more than \$7.0 million on hazmat-related activities, of which 66.4 percent went to the regional Level A hazmat teams. Some level of state support for local hazmat costs is relatively common in other states: 19 of 32 other states that responded to our survey indicated they provided support for hazmat response in FY 1999-2000. However, Wisconsin's expenditures were higher than those of every other state responding to our survey, including states with larger populations such as Illinois, Indiana, and Michigan.

Like Wisconsin, 12 of the 32 other states responding to our survey support hazmat activities with GPR. Nine states indicated they used fees on hazardous materials transporters or facilities to fund response. Transporter fees were the intended funding source in Wisconsin when the regional teams were first established, but they were statutorily replaced with GPR funding in the mid 1990s.

### Cost Recovery Charges Vary Widely Among Regional Teams

Regional and county-wide hazmat teams are authorized to recover the costs of responding to individual incidents from the party responsible at the site the incident occurred. When a hazmat team is unable to collect from the responsible party, it may seek reimbursement from the Department. We note, however, that charges among teams can vary significantly for similar items, such as equipment and vehicle charges. For example, hourly rates for a fire engine ranged from \$40 to \$200 per hour. We include a recommendation that the Division of Emergency Management standardize reimbursement rates to ensure that available funds are used more efficiently.

### **The Legislature May Wish to Review Funding and Response Structures**

As the Legislature reviews proposals concerning public safety programs during the special session to address the budget deficit, it may also be asked to consider a number of issues relating to the hazmat teams, including assessing the adequacy of overall funding levels or the potential for securing funding sources other than GPR. In addition, some consideration may be necessary to further define the relationships and the respective roles of the regional Level A and county-wide Level B teams, and how funds are allocated to them. For example, some have suggested that county-wide teams be designated assessment teams that determine whether a full Level A response is needed. Such a change could ensure that regional Level A teams respond only to incidents that require their full capabilities, help to limit regional teams' response costs, clarify the types of incidents to which regional or county-wide teams should respond, and provide for quicker response.

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