

TANDBERG CUSTOMER PROFILE

Flexibility, Scalability and Rapid Adaptability —

Critical Success Factors of the Environmental Protection Agency's Emergency Operations Center

Environmental Protection Agency's Emergency Operations Center

Whether serving as an operations hub to monitor local or national incidents or events; or — in the aftermath of a disaster like the space shuttle Columbia or Hurricane Katrina — coordinating the emergency response of agencies assets organizations and individuals, the Environmental Protection Agency's Emergency Operations Center (EOC) is a model facility for visual communication. The EOC utilizes TANDBERG video as an essential part of an infrastructure that supports the highest level of communication.

TANDBERG PRODUCTS AT THE EPA

Presenter Modules

MPS 800

Gatekeepers

Gateways

6000 Portables

1000's

7000's

1500's

TANDBERG Management System
(TMS)

EPA EOC OVERVIEW

The mission of the EOC, part of EPA's Office of Emergency Management, is to act as the nerve center in the event of a natural disaster, terrorist attack, or other incident of national significance. In addition, the EOC supports high-profile initiatives, such as government exercises and National Security events. The EOC has the need to communicate with other federal agencies such as the Department of Homeland Security and its component agencies such as the U.S. Coast Guard and Federal Emergency Management Agency.

The EOC's current video conferencing capabilities are isolated via Access Control List (ACL) from the rest of the EPA network and are in the initial stages of migrating to having full IP-based capabilities within the EPA's national infrastructure. Video conferencing is a critical component of the Center's communications strategy, and TANDBERG products are featured throughout the facility (see sidebar for a full list).

EOC OPERATIONS & USAGE

More than two decades ago, as the agency coordinated many responses with impact to human health and the environment, EPA leaders had a vision of what was needed to react more effectively. In the twenty years since, the operation has grown from the "bank of telephones and a few computers" of that era to today's leading-edge facility, which employs the most powerful communications technologies available to serve in the event of a natural or man-made emergency.

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The EOC's vision is the same today as it was twenty-odd years ago – to create an infrastructure that supports a highly effective emergency response. “We as an organization don't directly respond,” comments Mojgan Rahai of the Office of Emergency Management, “instead, we facilitate the response to the emergency or event. Our communications facilities need to perform the same function — they need to make it easier to respond, easy to communicate and be effective, no matter where our personnel or response partners may be located — certainly not put additional technical hurdles in our path.

An excellent example of the EOC's current capacity to respond to emergencies was in the Hurricane Katrina effort it coordinated in autumn of 2005. “For weeks, our facility was at peak usage,” explains Rahai. “Our main conference room was in constant use, the central monitoring room had overflow capacity usage, with continual news and emergency coverage on all display screens, and emergency response support personnel were holding breakout meetings in our two smaller conference rooms around the clock.

“The result was that this facility afforded a highly effective hub through which to coordinate response efforts, using all manners of communication,” continues Rahai. “Affected regions were able to stay in touch via e-mail, voice and video, sharing data visually and in real time, as well as coordinate with other agencies and emergency response organizations on local, state and federal levels. It showed us the capacity of the Center, and gave us some ideas on how we could improve operations further.”

The latest EOC installation was initially completed three years ago — yet it is constantly evolving to meet new requirements and support newly-identified needs. Rahai and her team noted that the development of the facility is continuous — and that should be expected. “Part of our best advice to other agencies considering this kind of communications facility is to first think out of the box. Imagine every kind of situation, and every kind of potential usage. Then second, know that there will always be more — and choose flexible, standards-based and easily — and cost-effectively — scalable components, so you can adapt and evolve your facility's capabilities well.”

While the designers originally thought this facility would be used for occasional emergency responses and high-level executive meetings, it has instead turned out to be a very popular resource. Regular cross-regional meetings, project collaboration, trainings, simulation exercises and more are part of the EOC's growing list of applications.

THE FUTURE — EXPANSION AND MOVING TO IP

The EOC is now assisting all 10 regions of the EPA to upgrade their own emergency response centers to similar configurations. As the network grows, it is being designed to accommodate not only internal EPA communications, but also voice, data and video communications with other agencies and organizations outside the EOC's network.

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An important part of this expansion is the planned migration to an IP-based network throughout the EPA. As system components are selected, a particular emphasis is placed on ensuring they work well within an IP environment. "When we move into an IP world, our capacity for call management will be exponentially increased. It will be critical to be able to effectively manage multiple endpoints and multipoint control units (MCUs), in order to deal with the increased number of calls, locations, users, equipment and so on.", comments Ron Broadnax, EPA contractor and Manager of the ITS-EPA HQ Voice Infrastructure Services Network.

"We learn with every event to which we respond," comments Rahai. "The communication infrastructure we create needs to be as reliable, flexible, and able to evolve and adapt as we are required to be."

EOC FACILITY DESCRIPTION

- Centrally located in downtown Washington, D.C.
- Housed in a well appointed, custom-designed suite within the Ariel Rios Building
- Offers a variety of communications functionality:
 - An executive conference room complete with audio, video, computer integration and Smart Board capabilities
 - A central situation monitoring room with a capacity of 12 simultaneous users, lined with 14 monitors streaming live news feeds from across the globe
 - Three adjoining conference rooms for smaller meetings, modeled after the executive conference room.
- Ample space for overflow personnel (in the Katrina response, tables and computer connections were set up for numerous visiting staff)
- A computer support facility located on site
- A central monitoring room staffed 24/7, with a control booth from which all facility communications can be run
- A Watch Officers' room, equipped with various communication devices such as Satellite phones, High frequency radios and direct telephone lines to the Emergency response community and access to the WebEOC, an Internet based program that manages the collection and dispersal of integrated information to keep all members of the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) up to date with real-time updates of information. This allows for timely, informed decisions, which will keep all parties on the right track to properly manage a crisis situation.
- A server room located on site, providing quick and easy access to fully redundant systems for adaptation, troubleshooting and other rack-level maintenance/management operations

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