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## Putting out the Cerro Grande fire: a case study in government crisis communication Conference Item [presentation]

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# Overview

- Cerro Grande Fire initiated by NPS as prescribed burn in May 2000
- Largest wildfire in New Mexico history
- Case study to examine:
  - NPS media response
  - Degree to which it reflected best practices
  - Correlation of crisis type to response (per Coombs' continuums)
- Can government agencies benefit from P.R. best practices used in private industry?

# Methodology

- Case Study
- Sources used
  - National and regional newspapers
  - National broadcast news transcripts
  - NPS and CGFJIC press releases, morning reports, and timeliness (Internet archives)
  - Investigative reports
  - U.S. government field operations guide

# Literature Review

- Crisis Definition: “Unpredictable, but not unexpected” (Coombs, 1999a)
- Crisis Typologies (Coombs): Natural disasters vs. megadamage
- Six Crisis Management Concerns:
  - Vulnerabilities
  - Types
  - Team
  - Spokesperson
  - CMP
  - Review comm system

# Best Practice: Speed and Disclosure

- Wildfire declared May 5 -- Public Info Model
  - Incident team with Info Officer deployed May 8
  - Joint Information Center established May 8
  - First press release May 10
  - State of emergency declared May 11
  - Inter-agency investigation initiated May 11
  - 30-day national moratorium on prescribed burns May 11
  - FEMA-New Mexico disaster recovery center (with toll-free lines) created May 15
- Messages quickly disclose all, but not controlled by NPS

# Best Practice:

## Match Crisis Type to Response

- Mega damage crisis with high level of organizational responsibility
- Literature suggests most accommodative approach (i.e. corrective action, apology)
- Government holds itself accountable (compensation, but no evidence of preventative measures)
- Stops short of full apology and expressions of compassion

# Best Practice:

## Responsibility and Compassion

- Preliminary Investigation blames NPS for fire
- NPS cited for lack of provisions for media
- Compensation to victims promised
- Relatively few articles chastise NPS
- Admission of responsibility + compensation promises likely limit damage
- Surprisingly, no expressions of compassion

# Summary: What Worked

- Information issued fully and quickly
- Accommodative strategy appropriate
- Acceptance of responsibility



# Summary: Needs Improvement

- NPS relinquished control of messages
- No apparent attempt to frame messages
- No full apology or request for forgiveness
- No corrective action to prevent repeat
- Little to no expression of compassion
  - Already admitted responsibility
  - Loss of opportunity to gain stakeholder goodwill

# Lessons Learned

- Crisis Communication best practices do apply to government agencies
- Government agencies require CMPs to contribute to communication effectiveness
- When organizational responsibility is high:
  - Ask forgiveness
  - Devise corrective actions
  - Express compassion

# Limitations and Future Research

- Lack access to those directly involved with communication strategies
- Inability to generalize beyond individual case
- More research needed with government institutions as subjects