Incident Summary
The Gotham Shield 2017 Response functional exercise involved a 10-kiloton improvised nuclear device (IND) detonated in Weehawken, New Jersey. The catastrophic event impacted New Jersey and New York, and New York City. The incident caused tens of thousands of fatalities, hundreds of thousands injured, massive population displacement, and public uncertainty regarding radiation-related health concerns. It also caused extensive damage to housing and critical infrastructure, along with large volumes of radioactive debris, economic losses, and environmental impacts.

With the unexpected nature (no notice event) and catastrophic impacts of this scenario, FEMA designated this as a “Level 1” event at the onset of the explosion. FEMA devolved all of the response activities to the National Response Coordination Center (NRCC) in accordance with the FEMA Level 1 transition plan. This Level 1 designation was coupled with the fact that due to the incident’s location FEMA Region II’s Regional Response Coordination Center (RRCC) and/or staff would be inaccessible and/or impacted. As a result, FEMA Region II devolved all of the day-to-day essential functions of FEMA Region II’s operations, to FEMA Region V. FEMA deployed a National Incident Management Assistance Team (IMAT) and a FEMA Regional IMAT to each State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC) and to an Interim Operating facility (IOF) as an overflow location in each state.

The FEMA Region II ESF #11 Coordinator played this exercise as it would have happened: shelter-in-place for the first 48-hrs, while supporting the states and the NRCC from the ESF #11 Coordinator’s Official Duty Station.

The primary focus of this exercise for ESF #11 was the implementation and coordination of ESF #11 at the NRCC for a Level 1 event and practicing using the Level 1 checklist.

Lessons Learned

Successful

1. It was good opportunity to evaluate the ESF #11 NRCC Level 1 procedures and checklist as it hadn’t been reviewed since 2015. This helps to identify focal points for ESF #11 as FEMA has expanded their Level 1 policies and procedures.

2. While the exercise only focused on addressed the first 3 days of the response, it brought to light the challenges of not having an RRCC initially stood up with the ESF #11 Regional Coordinator activated to it. Operational coordination was immediately transitioned to the NRCC. While this was known for the exercise play, it identified the need for enhanced readiness for a no notice event for NRCC ESF #11 Desk staff.

3. It was very beneficial to have communications with Dr. Kevin Dennison of USDA APHIS Animal Care and of the Federal Radiological Monitoring and Assessment Center’s Advisory Team (FRMAC A-Team). Dr. Dennison provided expert guidance on the realities of radiological decontamination of pets and the very limited personnel and resources to conduct the decontamination. He also advised on current decontamination methods and standards.
Challenges/Areas for Improvement

1. In a Level 1 event the ESF #11 National Coordinator and the ESF #11 NRCC Desk Officers will have significantly more responsibilities. The Desk Officers will also be required to make critical decisions regarding the allocation and coordination of critical resources, and be more involved in writing mission assignments. This will require enhanced role definition and advanced training to better prepare for increased desk responsibilities. Training and defining roles should include ESF #11 Non-Governmental Agency (NGO) partners, to ensure a coordinated response.

2. During a catastrophic radiological event, the response period will be longer than our usual activations. ESF #11 staffing resources will likely be taxed, as historically Desk Officers do not staff more than a day or two consecutively. The activation of other FEMA Regions’ RRCCs that are impacted or providing host-state support to the millions of people and pets evacuating or relocating to other states, will also require significant staffing. This will require additional recruiting and training of Desk Officers and Subject Matter Experts, to support ongoing response needs.

3. In a radiological event there will be challenges in addressing the impacts to animal/agriculture emergency management. The exercise highlighted the need to better define the support and capabilities for livestock, decontamination, food safety, depopulation and many other agricultural health issues. Early coordination with USDA Recovery Leads will be essential to ensure a smooth transition to recovery.