

Keeping the RRT “Fresh”: Lessons Learned on Core Membership a Decade Post-Establishment

Randy J. Treadwell, MPH¹ and LCDR Kelsey Volkman, REHS, CPH²



Summary

The Washington Food/Feed Rapid Response Team (WA RRT) was established in 2009. Two of the initial team activities were to develop a membership process and recruit multi-jurisdictional members.

Early on, a core/auxiliary membership structure was implemented. Core members were pre-identified and were first to be called upon for responses/activations and RRT-specific training/exercises. This created a strong team culture, but identifying available Federal/State core members during a response was challenging.

Subsequently, WA RRT implemented the approach that any appropriate Federal/State regulatory member could be deployed as a member of the WA RRT based on needed knowledgebase, skills, and availability/location. This created a larger and more flexible response network, but negatively impacted a close-knit team structure.

Ten years into continual improvement, WA RRT is re-initializing discussions with both state and federal response partners to identify what works for each partner, what didn't work with previous processes, and how the future membership structure of the WA RRT can be approached in order to strike an effective balance between strong team culture and necessary response flexibility.

Initial Membership Approach

Establishing a membership was one of the initial activities of the new WA RRT in 2009. Members were drawn heavily from the state food safety program and food investigators from FDA Office of Human and Animal Food Division 6-West (Seattle District). A core member list was developed and these members were expected to attend RRT trainings and deploy to the field to support all-hazards RRT responses.

Who to Select?

Early in the selection process, it was determined that seasoned FDA investigators would be part of the core membership (typically GS-11 to GS-13). One observation was that these investigators were often supervisors or members of training/foreign inspection cadres that demanded their time and impacted availability for last-minute deployment.

WSDA focused primarily on established field inspection staff that were geographically dispersed throughout the state. Experience varied among the inspection staff and included regional managers who supervised the field staff.

Incentives

Membership on the RRT could be viewed as a supplemental activity to include on the Performance Management Appraisal Program (PMAP) to be reviewed during annual evaluations for considerations related to detail selection, bonuses, promotions, etc.

WSDA looked into similar incentives and identified that membership could be included on annual performance evaluations and expectations, but promotional/monetary incentive posed a challenge.

Adapted Membership Approach

Why the Change?

Approximately four years into development, WA RRT membership was re-assessed by both WSDA and FDA OHAFO-W6 representatives primarily due to the lack of availability of staff to deploy and concerns about rotating staff into/out of the RRT due to changing responsibilities and interest.

How did it Differ from Before?

The revised process assumed that all WSDA and FDA OHAFO-W6 staff who had appropriate subject matter expertise and training could be considered a member of the WA RRT and could be called upon to respond to a food/feed response if needed.

10-Year Re-Assessment

In 2019/2020, WA RRT once again re-addressed membership in order to ensure that the processes in place continued to meet the need the mission of the RRT and the needs of its members to protect public health.

Candid discussions continue between WSDA regulatory programs and the RRT Program to ensure membership meets the public health focus of efficient and effective food/feed emergency response. Needs identified include:

- Identifying sufficient number of staff to have effective coverage across the state, both geographically and for subject matter expertise.
- Be able to balance other important work being carried out by the regulatory programs and its staff.
- Be able to express the benefit of being an RRT member to investigators.

Discussions continue with the goal to strike a balance between maintaining a wide enough network of responders with knowledge of RRT capabilities, but small enough of a core team to promote a close team culture.



Photo: 2019 WA RRT annual exercise participants

Membership Structure	Benefits (to team and members)	Challenges (to team and members)
Smaller Core Membership Cadre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Perception of a closer, more tight-knit team. ❑ Easy to determine attendee list for exercises, trainings, and meetings. ❑ Small enough group to include in space-limited trainings (e.g. specific FEMA ICS in-person courses). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Possible limits knowledge of RRT capabilities within agencies unless rigorous and continual outreach takes place. ❑ Limits response capacity and flexibility due to less number of current responders. ❑ Requires strategic recruitment of staff to ensure they are available for deployment.
Larger Core Membership Cadre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Casts a “wider net” of possible training attendees, increasing awareness around RRT capabilities. ❑ Fosters a wider and more diverse response network for the RRT. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Possible negative impacts to perception of small, close-knit team culture. ❑ Negatively impacts specialized nature of RRT Core Member positions and professional value of being a member.
Seasoned staff identified as Core Members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Bring a lot of knowledge base and experience to a response, both technically and institutional. ❑ Can serve in a mentoring capacity for less seasoned staff. ❑ May be looking for new opportunities to expand their knowledgebase. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Often have increased responsibilities such as staff supervision, projects, and/or increased travel that impacts availability to deploy.
Less Seasoned staff identified as Core Members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Can be a longer-term training investment due to current stage of career. ❑ Anxious to learn new areas of food/feed regulation and emergency response. ❑ Expedited training and response/ICS experience. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ May still be building technical and institutional knowledge base. ❑ Training for regular work may impact availability for deployment and RRT-specific training.

Formal Membership Process

Prior to 2013, a formal process for recruiting, onboarding, and retiring staff from the RRT had not been fully developed.

As such, a formal documentation process was established to:

- Describe team member expectations and benefits
- Gauge individual investigator interest, knowledgebase, and direct supervisor support
- Provide annual review and renewal for Core Members
- Retire outgoing members

Lessons Learned

- RRT Core Membership size is a delicate balance: too small limits response capability; too large and the team culture may be negatively impacted.
- Important to re-assess foundational components of the RRT to ensure it still works for all partners.
- A staff member's availability (both current and future) should be considered before being assigned to the RRT core membership.
- Developing a formal recruitment, onboarding, and retirement process for core members keeps the RRT effective in responding to food and feed emergencies.

Contact Information

1. Randy J. Treadwell, MPH; Washington State Department of Agriculture Rapid Response and Emergency Management Program; rtreadwell@agr.wa.gov; 509-413-3739
1. Kelsey Volkman, REHS, CPH; U.S. Food and Drug Administration Human and Animal Food Operations, Division 6-West; Kelsey.Volkman@fda.hhs.gov; 425-302-0347