

PANDEMIC AAR AGENCY INPUT

Agency:

Representative:

Executive Summary

The Executive Summary provides a brief overview of the agency's response to the pandemic, identified impacts, major strengths demonstrated during the response and areas identified that require improvement and/or changes to agency plans, policies, or procedures.

Agency Impact

Identify the impacts to the agency in these main areas:

Internally (how did the pandemic impact the agency's internal operations/administration). For WSDOT the changes provided a range of challenges on how we conducted operations:

1. The first stay at home order had a direct impact on how WSDOT does business. A significant part of our operations requires people to be out on the roads doing maintenance and repair to the state road system. The agency was forced to quickly come up with ways to keep those who would be working on the highways gainfully employed. Some of the things that were done included providing access to trainings that directly support their jobs as well as other type of training although not directly job related, were beneficial.

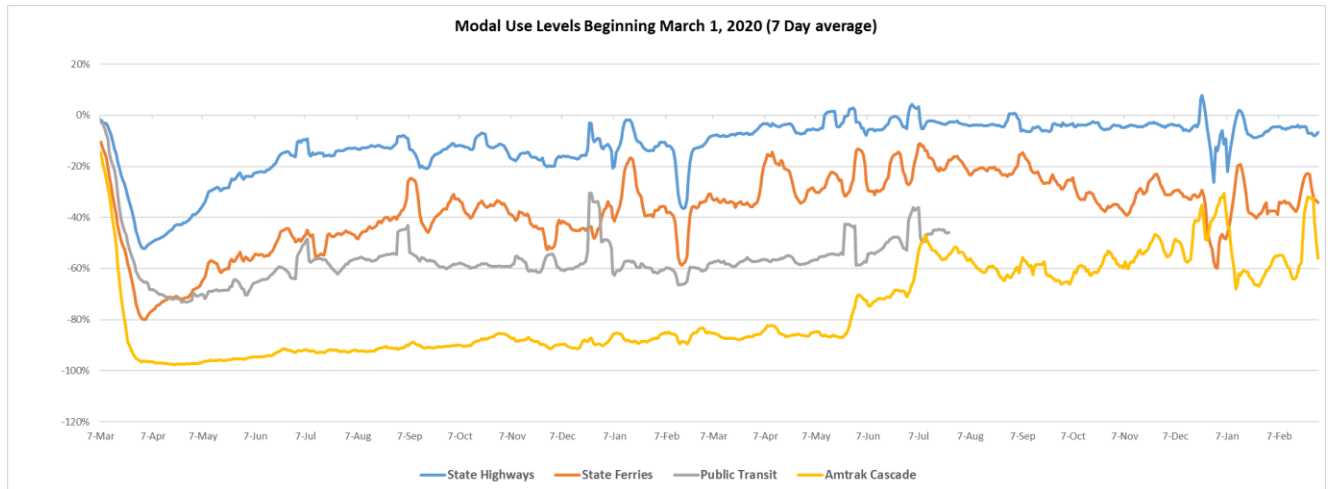
Moving the rest of the work force to work from home also had many challenges. The agency had been planning for a Continuity of Operations (COOP) Exercise that was to take place in March. The exercise would have those who jobs could work from home for one day, do so for one day. Although the exercise never took place, much of the groundwork that had been done to prepare for the exercise directly benefited the agency when it had to move to remote work.

WSDOT also had to contend with those whose work could not be done from home such as those working in the Washington State Ferry System. This was a critical lifeline for many communities in the state and needed to keep running. Keeping the system running posed many challenges including changing protective guidelines, getting Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for staff, and still being able to provide customer service.

2. In mid-spring when the agency began to bring back the highway maintenance staff that brought a new set of challenges. Among these was how to keep people separated as much as possible.

Working through the separation issues one of the solutions was to provide maintenance workers with separate vehicles to travel to and from job sites. WSDOT rounded up vehicles from across the fleet that were being under utilized (mostly due to the remote working) and provided those to maintenance to allow one person per vehicle as much as possible.

3. Overall, the agency did well in adapting as much of the operations as possible to remote work and has continued that since March of 2020.



Externally (how did the pandemic impact the agency’s operations with its customers)

COVID-19 provided many unique challenges to WSDOT operations. Some of its customer interaction moved to the online environment, but in some areas this was impossible. Ferries remains our biggest area of direct customer interaction. Ferries has expended a lot of effort trying to keep both its customers and staff safe during the pandemic and still provide this essential service. Early in the pandemic the decrease in customers using the system did allow the system to take the needed safety measures. But as traffic started to ramp back up, long standing staffing issues began to come to the forefront.

During the early days of the pandemic for various reasons Ferries limited hiring. This combined with a lack of people entering the Maritime Profession nationwide, began to show as operations began to ramp up. This has continued to impact ferry operations with canceling of runs due to staffing shortages becoming a regular occurrence. The vaccination mandate then contributed to this.

Interagency (what was the impact to interagency operations).

One of the biggest issues that has come out of the pandemic is the deterioration of personal relationships between agencies. Prior to the pandemic when staff interacted face to face, they were able to develop a personal level of trust based on that interaction. During the pandemic era many have capitalized on those relationship and continued to work together well. But as new staff have been brought on establishing those relationships and particularly the trust part of things has been harder.

In this environment meetings also have a significantly different flavor. When people met face to face a lot of interaction and relationship building took place before and after a meeting. This no longer happens. In the virtual environment people sign on just before the meeting and sign off immediately at the end.

Another issue that has impact agency’s ability to conduct interagency operations is the decrease in the workforce available. With this decrease, WSDOT has had to focus more and more on core operations, these being mostly internal. This has delayed many of the things that we did with other agencies in the past, and then when having to work together during things like a response, the multiagency preplanning is not as strong as it has been in the past.

Agency's involvement in areas specifically listed in the legislation [SB 5092 (9)(d)(i) (A)-(H)]:

(A) Aspects of the COVID-19 response that may inform future pandemic and all-hazards responses.

Although WSDOT used very limited parts of its COOP Plan to respond to the pandemic, many of the aspects of remote work and adapting to it, were incorporated into the 2020 update of the plan.

WSDOT had to develop the virtual Emergency Operations Center (EOC) concept on the fly as the remote work orders were implemented and stood up its EOC to support agency operations. WSDOT has been able to use the lessons learned from the virtual EOC during storm and wildfire responses since. It has also continued to refine the virtual EOC incorporating MSTeams better into EOC processes.

(B) Emergency responses that would benefit the business community and workers during a pandemic.

Virtual EOC?

(C) Standards regarding flexible rent and repayment plans for residential and commercial tenants during a pandemic.

I don't have anything on this, but it is tied to the homeless issue on our right away.

(D) Whether establishing regional emergency management agencies would benefit Washington state emergency response to future pandemics.

This could benefit WSDOT Emergency Management efforts. WSDOT has six regions plus Washington State Ferries that work with local emergency management. Each of our regions has at least six counties within the region. During response operations working with each county requires resources and time. Having less touch points would allow WSDOT to better use its resources keeping the transportation system viable and supporting local needs. Additionally, in counties with limited emergency management capability having a regional touchpoint would allow WSDOT to better coordinate support and prevent transportation system issues from overwhelming local response actions.

(E) Gaps and needs for volunteers to support medical professionals in performing their pandemic emergency response functions within Washington state.

Not applicable to WSDOT

(F) Gaps and needs for tools to measure the scale of an impact caused by a pandemic and tailoring the pandemic response to affected regions based on the scale of the impact in those regions.

The way that information was provided by Washington State Department of Health during the pandemic although useful to WSDOT as at times hard to translate into usable messages. WSDOT staff used that information to develop products that better suited its needs.

One issue that has come up in the last few months is as DOH has refined its products, WSDOT has had to undertake revisions of the way it uses DOH information. Early in the pandemic it was able to design the WSDOT products based on what DOH provided, and as what they provided has changed, it has not always been easy to adapt to the changes and still provide the information in a timely manner.

(G) Gaps and needs in health care system capacity and case tracking, monitoring, control, isolation and quarantine, and deploying medical supplies and personnel; and

See above

(H) Implementing guidelines for school closures during a pandemic.

Not applicable to WSDOT

Strengths

1. WSDOT worked with LNI and Governor's Council to develop safety guidance for construction and field crews.
2. COVID forced the use of virtual and technology solutions for remote work, including meeting management and project teamwork.
3. COVID response refine the definition of essential workers and implement plans to utilize them.
4. The response gave us an opportunity to develop and implement virtual EOC processes.

Areas for Improvement

1. Communications is dependent on a fragile intranet and internet system. Any small issues with internet connectivity can quickly snowball when a significant portion of the workforce is telecommuting
2. How to keep connectiveness or gain understanding of staff/teams/offices outside the employee's immediate sphere of work.
3. On boarding for new employees during a virtual environment – challenging to integrate new employees into response in a virtual world. This also applies to build teams in the workplace.
4. Emergency logistics and resource ordering and tracking is cumbersome. Too much reliance on single office ordering points.

Follow up Actions (intent to change plans, policies, or procedures)