

FEMA'S Government Relations Initiatives Benefit from Distributor Assistance

By Joe Beranek, president of Fire Equipment Manufacturers' Association

The Fire Equipment Manufacturers' Association (FEMA), through its Government Relations Committee (GRC), continues its mission to promote balanced fire protection and educate national, state, and local officials on the value and importance of fire extinguishers. The GRC has attained a number of important successes that have reinforced balanced fire protection and the presence of fire extinguishers in occupancies.

However, as more regulation challenges lie ahead, FEMA is calling on distributors to become involved, assist FEMA in leveraging key stakeholder relationships, educate end-users, and participate in the political process.

What is the GRC?

FEMA's Government Relations Committee, formed in 2004 out of the FEMA portable division, is an independent committee funded by four FEMA member companies—Amerex Corporation, Ansul Inc., Buckeye Fire Equipment Co., and Brooks Equipment Co., Inc. The four members dedicate great time, effort, and funds to this voluntary group which is dedicated to legislative and regulatory issues pertaining to commercial fire extinguishers and pre-engineered systems. Committee members work to increase their scope of influence within legislative and code writing bodies in an effort to positively affect fire codes and laws.

Fire equipment requirements, placement, and maintenance are dictated by the codes and statutes adopted by state and local authorities having jurisdiction (AHJs).

Distributor's can help by following this action plan for change:

- Educate customers
- Be politically active
- Connect with FEMA
- Expand the base
- Testify

NFPA standards and fire codes become law only when adopted by state authorities or local AHJs. States can amend standards and codes as they are adopted, resulting in a change in requirements. As state amendments are adopted, FEMA works to ensure that the new amended language promotes balanced fire protection.

Do you know your state fire code? Has it been amended, or is it currently in the process of being amended? Who is the AHJ responsible for overseeing and enforcing your state fire code? Do you know which edition of the fire code is being enforced? Are there special requirements or circumstances that must be considered during compliance? These are all important questions for distributors to know, and FEMA's GRC is here to help.

The GRC—with the help of Rasky Baerlein Strategic Communications, a prominent government relations firm—proactively monitors local, state, and national fire protection legislation in order to identify trends and prepare action plans when necessary. Dovetailing with FEMA's overall activities including strategic communications, marketing campaigns, educational materials, and a full-time code consultant, the GRC is building stronger relationships with outside influencers and key fire code decision makers across the country.

GRC Initiatives

FEMA's GRC is monitoring states that are in the process of adopting the International Fire Code (IFC) and working to remove "Section 906.1 exception," which eliminates or reduces the required number of extinguishers when quick-response sprinklers are installed in non-hazardous areas throughout commercial occupancies.

To date, FEMA's GRC has successfully brought about positive legislative changes in more than 15 states but could not have done so without the assistance and cooperation of local fire equipment distributors. In many cases where fire legislation was pending or state fire codes were adopted, the GRC reached out to local distributors to enlist fire service advocates who could testify at public code hearings.

Another key GRC activity has been the review of states' proposed licensing bills. Requirements such as minimum apprenticeship hours for technicians servicing engineered and pre-engineered fire sup-

pression systems are of interest and possible concern. In 2007, six states introduced licensing bills; two of the proposed bills required technicians working on pre-engineered systems to obtain 10,000 hours in a U.S. Department of Labor recognized apprenticeship program. FEMA worked with distributors and other key groups in an effort to educate legislators and interested parties on potential problems or issues with the legislation. To date, no bills have been signed into law that require burdensome apprenticeship hours for work on pre-engineered systems or portables.

There is a definite movement toward requiring licensing for sprinklers, engineered and pre-engineered systems, and portables. While fire code legislation changes may not have been introduced in your state yet, be aware that similar legislation could soon be introduced. We all must remain attentive to proposed changes and trends that can affect our industry.

Combating Negative Extinguisher Perceptions

Standards, codes, and legislation often grow out of industry-wide perceptions. Through contact with industry experts, FEMA has learned that fire extinguishers are generally viewed in a positive manner; however, the fire extinguisher industry faces several important perception challenges.

Some key industry influencers are of the opinion that end-users are not being properly trained in extinguisher use and therefore should not use the equipment. They also believe that the use of a fire extinguisher delays an alarm, the alerting of emergency officials, and occupant evacuation. FEMA is actively working to address and to positively change these perceptions.

What's more, FEMA has also heard opinions regarding a few distributors engaging



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in questionable business practices. These perceptions reflect poorly on the entire industry and create an overall less-than-favorable impression of fire equipment distributors as a whole. To positively change these impressions, distributors should proactively emphasize the end-users' best interests, focus on appropriate fire protection regardless of profits, and offer more customer education and training.

This year the GRC launched a strategic communications campaign to demonstrate

that fire extinguisher training is readily available and the equipment is easy to use. It is also aimed at helping end-users understand the importance of creating an emergency evacuation plan, as well as alerting authorities before using an extinguisher. The campaign's goal is to build positive perceptions toward the fire extinguisher industry and to educate fire code influencers on the importance of fire extinguishers in a balanced fire protection plan.

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Action Plan for Change

As FEMA's GRC continues to move across the country to tackle legislative issues, it will look to distributors for a local voice to help combat negative industry perceptions, participate in the code writing process, and leverage key local relationships.

Here's how you can get involved:

Educate customers. Offer fire extinguisher training and education options to your customers to demonstrate the ease of use. Suggest equipment and services based on the value and need in their fire-safety plan, in addition to code requirements. Know the codes so you can explain to your customers what the code is, why the codes are important, and how the recommended equipment meets the code.

Be politically active. Get to know your elected representatives on the state and local level by attending events and fundraisers. Work to understand your local code activity and, if possible, participate in fire marshal working groups and the code writing process. Participation at the grassroots level will help to establish key relationships and best position your opinions to be heard.

Connect with FEMA. Learn how your local fire marshals feel about the fire codes. If you hear that a fire code may be modified or amended, contact your equipment manufacturer or FEMA directly.

Expand the base. Leverage key relationships to recruit additional involvement in the process. Reach out to other distributors, as well as local fire chiefs and marshals, to form partnerships at both the local and state levels. The GRC is available to provide talking points and sample letters for use in your grassroots efforts.

Testify. Send testimony letters in support of FEMA's position to fire marshals and state representatives. Attend public hearings to share your expertise. Become involved in your industry so your voice of experience can be heard.

FEMA's GRC is working hard on behalf of you and the industry to ensure balanced fire protection. Our record reveals many successes, but distributor involvement is encouraged to continue this momentum and ensure that national, state, and local code requirements continue to promote balanced fire protection aimed toward saving lives and protecting property. Together, we can make a difference! ♦

For additional information about FEMA, visit their website at www.femalifesafety.com.

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