Research was conducted on how rural emergency managers at the local level understand and employ the National Incident Management System in 2007. This article focuses on research findings from face-to-face interviews with county emergency managers in three states. The data revealed that the majority of emergency managers interviewed interpret NIMS in a generally positive manner; however, they do so with considerable qualification. Emergency managers recognized that their interpretation of NIMS plays a role in how they comply with and implement NIMS; however, it was discovered that it is not the emergency managers’ interpretation that determines compliance and implementation as much as it is factors related to local reality. The unique amalgamation of emergency manager interpretations and local reality produced large variation in NIMS compliance and implementation—no two emergency managers and no two counties were exactly alike. Therefore, though the federal government mandated its expectations and standards for emergency management through NIMS, both people and aspects of place dictate the mandate’s interpretation and implementation. Based on findings from the research, implications of findings for emergency management are discussed and suggestions are made for future research.

**Key words:** incident management system, NIMS, ICS, disaster preparedness, disaster response, rural emergency management, national emergency management system

**Introduction**

The National Incident Management System (NIMS) was mandated by Homeland Security Presidential Directive 5 (HSPD-5), and enforced by the Homeland Security Act of 2002. NIMS constitutes a standardized set of concepts, principles, procedures, organizational processes, terminology, and standards for the management of preparedness, resources, communications and information, command and control, and ongoing maintenance related to the management of emergencies and disasters. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) defines NIMS as

a systematic, proactive approach guiding departments and agencies at all levels of government, the private sector, and nongovernmental...
organizations to work seamlessly to prepare for, prevent, respond to, recover from, and mitigate the effects of incidents, regardless of cause, size, location, or complexity, in order to reduce the loss of life, property, and harm to the environment (DHS 2007, p. 1).

Clearly, NIMS is grand in its conception, revolutionary in its implications, and imperial in its coverage. All local government entities, private sector, and nongovernmental organizations with a direct role in emergency management and response are supposed to participate in NIMS. It is, according to DHS (2007),

a comprehensive national approach, applicable at all jurisdictional levels and across functional disciplines, improves the effectiveness of emergency management/response personnel across the full spectrum of potential incidents and hazard scenarios (including but not limited to natural hazards, terrorist activities, and other manmade disasters)(p. 5).

Theoretically, all of emergency management should fall under its purview. All personnel involved with emergency management at all levels – from the volunteer firefighter in a rural county to a state director of emergency services—should be trained in NIMS. Furthermore, this is a plan with teeth. The National Integration Center (NIC) develops compliance and implementation criteria for NIMS and then measures and tracks state and local performance based on that criterion. As of 2005, the awarding of all federal homeland security dollars is contingent on NIMS compliance. At the local level, city and county emergency managers are charged with ensuring NIMS compliance and implementation.

Such a comprehensive, compelling, and compliance-driven plan addressing clear response-related shortcomings should be a programmatic “slam dunk”, but three broad issues suggest that NIMS may face significant challenges. First, the system’s standardized approach faces a very diverse set of organizations, levels of government, and actual events. Second, the success of NIMS is dependent on its faithful adoption, training, and practice in each organization and at each level of government pre and post disaster event. Third, NIMS is largely based on a command and control model, the effectiveness of which has been challenged by considerable pre-NIMS research. In fact, a wide variety of conditions have been found to impede the adoption and implementation of command and control systems.

The present study examines NIMS in a setting where the above issues converge—rural America. The cultural values in many rural settings emphasize independence, self-sufficiency, resistance to outside authority, and individuality (Logan 1997). Thus, the present study explores the views of emergency managers in three predominantly rural states in the Midwest. Specifically, this study sought answers to the following questions:
a) How do rural emergency managers at the local level interpret NIMS?

b) How does their interpretation impact the extent to which they implement NIMS?

**Literature Review**

**Standardization**

Implied within NIMS is an assumption that standardization of response to disasters is realistic. This is an appealing assumption, especially when contrasted with the opposite end of the continuum, complete absence of standard terminology, procedures, and practical routine. Certainly, the implementation of standard solutions would expedite the ability of emergency managers to address the many similar problems evidenced from disaster to disaster. Yet, how emergency management is situated and performs at local levels is often not conducive to standardized approaches to emergency management (Drabek 1985; Quarantelli 1988; Wolensky and Wolensky 1990).

Drabek (1985) and Sylves (1991) note how the federalist system of the United States results in a country characterized by decentralization and a lack of standardization. The varying views of local governments regarding hazards and risks and the best strategies and tactics to deal with them (Mileti 1980, 1999; Wisner et al. 2004; Tierney, Lindell, and Perry 2001) can pose another challenge to standardization. Furthermore, disasters have a tendency to generate problems that are difficult, if not impossible, for the emergency response apparatus to predict making implementation of a standardized management system, at times, inadequate (Drabek 1990; Kreps 1989; Schneider 1992).

The idea that all needs resulting from a disaster impact can be met systematically via bureaucratic processes and structures is in the face of a large body of literature to the contrary (Buck, Trainor, and Aguirre 2006; Drabek 1985; Lindell, Perry, and Prater 2005; Quarantelli 1988; Reardon 2005; Schneider 1992; Siegel 1985; Tierney 2005; Wenger, Quarantelli and Dynes 1990; Wise 2002). Many academics have argued that the emergent solutions often seen in disaster response need to be recognized as a fundamental aspect of effective disaster response (Comfort 1999; Drabek and McEntire 2002; Kendra and Wachtendorf 2002; Kreps 1989; Mendonca and Wallace 2004; Stallings and Quarantelli 1985; Quarantelli 1983; Wenger, Quarantelli, and Dynes 1990). The importance of spontaneous, flexible, or emergent solutions is in part driven by the fact that local governments are the first to respond, have jurisdictional authority until outside help is requested, and remain in charge until help arrives (Perry 2003; Waugh 1994). Therefore, in the absence of immediate assistance, local governments often employ spontaneous solutions to emergent needs. The standardization mandated by NIMS could interfere with creative solutions to unique problems if local governments rigidly adhere to the structures and processes specified in NIMS.
Local Differences

Research has shown that city and county, or local level, governments have widely varying emergency management capabilities (Drabek 1987; Kettl 2003; Quarantelli 1988; Waugh 2000, p. 41). Drabek (1987) found that population size was important in the resources available to emergency management as well as the type and frequency of use of different management strategies by emergency managers (p. 207-226). Ironically, local capacity in large part determines the extent to which nationwide changes, such as NIMS, are implemented. As Sylves and Waugh (1996) put it, “…the real test of whether changes in the national system are meaningful will come in the disaster response and hazard management capabilities of thousands of local governments” (p. 48).

The sheer number and types of organizations involved in the management of disasters is staggering. At the very least, there is a dedicated emergency manager and/or emergency management department at the federal, state, and local levels; beyond that, there are myriad government agencies, private sector organizations, and nongovernmental organizations that play a role in emergency management at every level (Kettl 2003). Each of these agencies and organizations is charged with different missions, priorities, perspectives, and cultures (Kettle 2003; Neal and Webb 2006). Wenger et al. (1990) noted “the social complexity of disaster occasions preclude the application of one organizational model to a response which is multi-organizational in nature” (p. 9). Wise (2002) lists some of the conditions that would have to be present for this type of system to be effective in light of the numerous organizations involved.

[O]rganizations to be coordinated have been identified or can readily be identified by the headquarters coordinators; that the relationships of these organizations to each other are well understood; that agreement has been reached about what objectives will be accomplished by altering certain of these inter-organizational relationships; and that the authority and means to effectuate desired goals exist to alter the relationships in the desired direction. It assumes hierarchy will facilitate the implementation. (Wise 2002, p. 141)

The shared view of Choi and Brower (2006) and Waugh (1994) suggests development at regional, county, and local management levels is a far better strategy to pursue for managing disasters than initiatives generated at the national level. Local and area responders are more inclined to be networked, know more about the area, and know what works for their communities (Choi and Brower 2006; Gillespie and Murty 1994).

Command and Control

Command and control models have been touted as a potentially effective foundation for emergency management (Bigley and Roberts 2001; Cole 2000; Lester and Krejci
Yet, despite the support for these types of systems, some have suggested that they may not be a salve for emergency management nationwide (Drabek 2003; Neal and Phillips 1995). The assumption that a hierarchical model for emergency management is both possible and appropriate is appealing. If there has been confusion at the bottom, impose clarity from the top. Such an approach certainly can work. However, the success of this model has been most often evidenced in the context of specific emergencies within the culture of a single discipline that supports highly structured lines of authority (Bigley and Roberts 2001; Cole 2000; Waugh 2003). The fire discipline and the military are two examples that have used structured, command systems with success for decades (Molino 2006; Nicholson 2003; Perry 2003).

The literature suggests that the command and control model is less successful in large-scale disasters and where multiple unique organizations are required to work together in a nonroutine manner (Buck et al. 2006; Dynes 1993, 2000; Howitt and Leonard 2006; Neal and Phillips 1995; Perrow 2005; Schroeder, Wamsley, and Ward 2001; Waugh 2006; Wenger et al. 1990; Wise and Nader 2002). Furthermore, the effective implementation of a command and control model requires that there exist clear, agreed upon lines of authority between levels of government and the organizations involved in disaster response. When multiple agencies are involved, such a requirement is a significant challenge. Agencies retain their individual missions and authorities in disaster situations, and no one agency has power to supersede another.

Designation of an empowered leader in a large-scale disaster situation would not necessarily solve common disaster response issues. As Howitt and Leonard (2006) stated, “NIMS does not ensure that responsible officials will know or play their roles effectively or that conflicts will not arise in interpreting the rules” (p. 220). This observation poses potential difficulty for NIMS as a management system.

NIMS is based in large part on the Incident Command System (ICS), a command and control model that emerged after forest fires devastated California in the 1970s. The ICS shares much in common with NIMS, but the two systems are not the same. ICS is a subcomponent of the Command and Control component of NIMS designed for the on-scene management of emergencies and disasters. NIMS is broader in scope, claims to be applicable in all phases of emergency management, and specifies structures and processes for both on-scene and off-site management (e.g. emergency operations centers, multiagency coordination centers, joint information office) of emergencies and disasters. Yet, because both ICS and NIMS represent hierarchical, standardized, command and control models that claim the structures and processes within each system are suitable to emergencies and disasters of all types, scales, and durations it is reasonable to consider the literature related to both systems.

Studying the fire discipline’s implementation of ICS, Wenger et al. (1990) found that variation in the manifestation of ICS between departments, problems with command and
control, lack of integration of other organizations into the ICS structure, and issues with inter-organizational communication and coordination prevented the system from being both efficient and effective in emergency and disaster response. Researching the use of ICS across disciplines, Moynihan (2007) discovered that the nature of the disaster impacted the extent to which ICS was used successfully. Specifically, Moynihan (2007) found ICS performed better when

responders faced a limited number of manageable tasks; crisis were geographically limited, the network size was manageable; responders with experience with the ICS model; hub agencies had high capacity and adequate resources; [and] responders had strong positive working relationships with one another (p. 34).

Buck et al. (2006) posited that how people and organizations implement ICS is an issue—not the system itself—and yet, they concluded “…it is unlikely that the system will ever be fully implemented for all phases and actors in disasters” (Buck et al. 2006, p. 21).

Conducting research on NIMS specifically, Neal and Webb (2006) discovered that issues related to training, organizational culture, and lack of buy-in by those expected to implement the system influenced how NIMS was utilized in the response to Hurricane Katrina. Examining the implementation of NIMS within one disaster, Jensen (2008) found that particular aspects of the disaster (e.g., type, scale, and severity), issues related to training, and the consistency and continuity with which the system is used within and between organizations involved in the disaster response were important determinants of the usefulness of the system.

So will NIMS ultimately work at the local level or even be helpful? Simply requiring compliance and implementation with a mandate does not mean that it will happen (May and Williams 1986; Tierney et al. 2001, p. 206). However, there are indications that some change is occurring. Caruson and MacManus (2006) found intergovernmental and interorganizational relationships in emergency management have improved overall as a result of recent federal mandates, including NIMS. Furthermore, Tierney et al. (2001) write, “There is evidence to show that mandates and other types of legal and regulatory requirements can have a positive impact on disaster preparedness and response, especially if they are applied with consistency and accompanied by evidence of serious commitment” (p. 205). Nevertheless, it is also clear that full implementation of NIMS is not happening (Jensen 2008; Neal and Webb 2006; Waugh 2006). Intraorganizational vertical (and in some cases horizontal) relationships are not as strong as they need to be for NIMS be successful (Morris 2006), nor has NIMS and its various components been adopted, trained and practiced to the extent necessary at the local level to be efficiently
and uniformly executed in a disaster response (Leonard and Howitt 2006; Moynihan 2007; Sylves 2006).

**Method**

In-depth, face-to-face interviews were the data collection method for this exploratory study. Purposive sampling (Ritchie and Lewis 2003) was undertaken in three Midwestern states. The sample for this study was not probability-based and is not generalizable to all county emergency managers; rather, the sample for this study was what Ritchie and Lewis (2003) would call a homogenous “critical case sample” of county emergency managers. These types of samples are “chosen to give a detailed picture of a particular phenomenon... this allows for detailed investigation of social processes in a specified context” (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003, p. 79).

County emergency managers are arguably the most critical part of the emergency management structure in rural states (Waugh 1994); and, in the case of NIMS, county emergency managers are charged with coordinating NIMS implementation pre-disaster and ensuring their jurisdiction meets NIMS compliance measures on an ongoing basis. Due to the important role of county emergency managers and the few emergency managers of other types in the states where research was conducted (i.e. city emergency managers, university emergency managers, private sector emergency managers), a homogenous sample was most appropriate for this study.

Although ten interviews had originally been scheduled in each state, after completing an initial thirteen in the first state and completing eight in the second state and nine in third, it was clear that theoretical saturation (Strauss and Corbin 1998) had been reached in the areas where research was being conducted. Strauss and Corbin (1998) define theoretical saturation as the point in category development when no new properties, dimensions, or relationships emerge during analysis” (p. 143). Thus, thirty county emergency managers were interviewed. Some of the county emergency managers interviewed represented more than one county; therefore, although thirty interviews were conducted thirty-eight counties were represented. Given that this study did not employ a probability sample, the results are not generalizable to all county emergency managers.

Additional interviews held with two city emergency managers, three NIMS trainers, and twenty-three paid and volunteer emergency first responders from the fire discipline and emergency medical services were another important source of theoretical sampling (Strauss and Corbin 1998) during data collection and analysis. These additional interviews allowed the researcher to focus on the differences between urban and rural emergency management.

An interview guide facilitated interviews. In keeping with the grounded theory methodology, the questions were open-ended and general. The questions elicited responses on interview participants’ experience, opinions on the national emergency management system, feelings about NIMS, the impact of NIMS on their job, support
within their jurisdiction for NIMS, the training of responders in their jurisdiction, and how NIMS would be relevant to disaster response if a disaster were to occur.

As interviews were conducted, they were analyzed in keeping with the grounded theory tradition as described in Strauss and Corbin (1998). Specifically, the following techniques were used: microanalysis, involving both open, axial, and selective coding; theoretical sampling though the asking of interview questions and comparing across interviews; diagramming the conditional/consequential matrix that was emerging; and, memoing on emerging categories and their properties and dimensions (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

Findings

The findings section begins by addressing the primary research question posed for this study concerning how rural emergency managers at the local level interpret NIMS. The process of data analysis revealed that, while county emergency managers recognize that their perceptions of NIMS have an impact on NIMS implementation, there are factors beyond their individual control that constrain or compel implementation of NIMS in their jurisdictions. The second findings section, “Local Conditions”, presents these factors. Finally, the implications of emergency manager perceptions and local conditions for the implementation of NIMS in a disaster situation are discussed.

Emergency Manager Perceptions

There was considerable variation in interviewees’ overall support for NIMS. Three broad groups emerged including, those with unwavering support, those with complete disregard, and those with a limited appreciation of NIMS. Some emergency managers (N=6) were completely supportive. They firmly believed in NIMS as a concept and a system for emergency management. Despite acknowledging factors constraining successful implementation of NIMS, they were advocates of both adopting NIMS principles and fully implementing its structures and processes. Second, there were emergency managers (N = 5) who were completely opposed to the system. These emergency managers wrote off NIMS completely on the basis of its seeming inapplicability to the rural area they managed. No part of NIMS was viewed as worthwhile or beneficial. Most emergency managers (N = 19), however, were generally supportive of ICS, but had serious reservations regarding NIMS overall. The following analysis relates themes in the perceptions from the majority of emergency managers interviewed.

Reacting

The majority of emergency managers in the three state research area believed that NIMS was developed as a reaction to perceived problems with the 9/11 response.
Emergency managers saw NIMS as politically motivated, imposed in a top-down fashion, and mandated without consensus building among those expected to enact the management system. This perception of NIMS is seen in each of the following two quotations. As one emergency manager said,

A lot of it comes from when a governor says something to his state staff or when the president says something to his staff – it’s, “Get out and do this we’re looking stupid. We need to get this and this done and everybody’s job is at stake”. And, everybody takes it to the point where it starts not to make sense at all.

Interviewer: So they are reacting?

They are reacting. NIMS is a reaction to incidents. They’re reacting, absolutely.

Or as another emergency manager described it,

Maybe there was some sort of need for uniformity, but they, as usual, typical of government, they took it…to a high level without any research into it, I don’t believe, or a feasibility study.

The perception of NIMS as a reaction appeared to be integral to understanding how seriously many emergency managers took NIMS. As emergency mangers pointed out, NIMS was not the first reactive policy in emergency management. In fact, NIMS is only the most recent policy reaction to disaster (Rubin 2007). In the view of most emergency managers interviewed, policy change in emergency management change has been rapid and, at times, required significant adjustments to how local emergency management programs were supposed to function.

Change

Emergency managers in this study witnessed many programmatic changes. One emergency manager put the changes in historical perspective going back to the days of the Cold War and Civil Defense.

But now it’s evolved into we’re not focusing so much on natural disasters; the nuclear is gone. Basically, that’s no more interest which it’s kind of fallen off the earth, shall we say, since the break up of the Soviet Union and now we’re more into the biological. Well, nuclear is still considered but the dirty bombs the chemical attacks—we’re more into that right now
protecting and the terrorism. It’s evolved more into that than what it used to be.

Another emergency manager summarized the changing nature of emergency management.

NIMS is like a lot of stuff over thirty years. Here’s this new thing let’s get on it, just like in the nuclear days, and then it starts dying and fizzling, and then there’s another new thing, and now we are going to do this, this, and this.

Those who witnessed shifting hazard emphasis, funding levels, planning requirements, and response mechanisms doubted the permanence of NIMS.

I’m afraid if the feds would throw this out and come out with something else then the next time people are going to say why should we do that? Remember the NIMS, and we went to all that trouble?

Emergency managers perceived NIMS as a system that would inevitably be replaced, and yet, virtually all interviewed were quick to cite the tremendous impact the policy changes related to 9/11 have had on their job. Prior to 9/11, emergency managers felt they had flexibility to fashion their emergency management programs to the perceived needs, capabilities, and capacities of their communities. Since 9/11, emergency managers reported continuously working to keep up with state and federal requirements that are out of touch with the needs and priorities of their jurisdiction.

Until 9/11 we had it really fat. There was no Department of Health to worry about, no Homeland Security grants to worry about, there was no NIMS to worry about. There were no initiatives and we were doing our own thing—having our disasters, getting a presidential [disaster declaration] and then recovering. Then 9/11 and the whole waterfront changed…

The creation of DHS, the funneling of federal funds for emergency management through DHS, and the institution of NIMS are just three factors emergency managers cited as recent changes to their job. Rural emergency managers felt as though they have been caught in an almost constant state of “fire fighting.”

[Here’s how emergency management is functioning today. What is the hottest thing the most important thing I have on my desk today? Go through it. Do whatever. And, do emergency managers know this whole
system well even though they’ve been through it? No they don’t. Even I don’t. We’re just so damn busy.

Thus, emergency managers viewed NIMS in a context of reaction and change. This context significantly affected the emergency managers’ overall response to NIMS. In addition, emergency managers took issue with basic assumptions upon which the system is based.

**Assumptions**

Most emergency managers said that all, or parts, of NIMS were based on a series of false assumptions about the nature of emergency management and local settings. The following three presumably faulty assumptions were commonly referred to by emergency managers: a) “it [NIMS] works;” b) NIMS will be equally effective for everybody and every disaster; and, c) people will be both willing and dedicated to adopting and implementing NIMS.

Ok, um implementation hasn’t been as smooth as it could be, but again there were a set of assumptions, hey we’re going to… take this template cause it works, and apply it to this, and it will work for everybody. And there were a lot of assumptions, made…like one, that people would be motivated to take it.

These common assumptions were perceived to be partially or completely inaccurate by the majority of emergency managers. Most of those interviewed felt that NIMS goes so far beyond their needs that it appears to be ridiculous.

The NIMS part is, it seems, like a wonderful way to bring the whole world together, and we can all feel warm and fuzzy. Yeah, hold my hand and sing in tune. But, unless I go to Minnesota or to New York or somewhere out of my element I have no real need for it. I can go to [City X], and we talk the same general language. We do things the same general way.

Respondents also questioned the most fundamental assumption of all—that a major structural change such as NIMS was needed. Instead, the need most frequently mentioned was funding—not plans, policy, standard operating procedures, coordination, structure and organization, or command and control in disaster situations.

The issue of funding is indeed relevant to a discussion of NIMS, but not because implementation of NIMS is a major source of funding at the local level, but because NIMS compliance is used as leverage for the granting of all federal preparedness and response funding. Therefore, whether or not NIMS is needed, the money is, so emergency managers are forced to work towards compliance with a program whose
assumptions they question. “It’s kind of hard on these departments when they make it one of the stipulations so they can get the money they need just to function the way it is.”

**Rural-Urban Difference**

Rural emergency managers often expressed the opinion that NIMS is more appropriate for urban than rural areas and that administrators at the federal level do not appreciate rural/urban differences. “Because what the federal government does not understand is that we talk to each other here. We work together. We are rural”. In addition, another manager stated, “I think most of them think it is impractical for us. You know if it was New York where you do have that situation then it’s going to work for you. But where you only have three or four fire departments …they all grew up together. They all know each other. There’s only ten in each one. They don’t really see the necessity in it”. Respondents suggested that the lack of fit for NIMS in rural areas is due to the following factors: a) the role of time and distance in the coordination of disaster response, b) the prevalence of help-giving behavior, c) the value placed on self-reliance, and d) the inappropriateness of some of the NIMS components.

The distance between towns or cities in the jurisdictions of these emergency managers, and needed hospitals, responders, and resources, constrains how quickly jurisdictions are able to respond to a disaster. The role of time is directly related to distance—everything is spread so far apart it takes a lot of time to respond. Given the few resources that are available in rural areas, rural emergency managers can be rapidly overwhelmed, and time and distance complicate the emergency manager’s ability to access help.

From this hospital here to the next closest one, which isn’t very big, its fifty miles away, and, you know, we got another one in [City X] and its sixty two miles away. Those are the closest, so you have an incident here, and you can lose all your medical staff in a heartbeat…But the folks on the East Coast and the Washington bureaucrats don’t understand that we have miles and miles of miles out here.

We can’t run down to Lowe’s or Home Depot and buy what we need if a storm comes up. We use what we have here. We can’t run down and buy what we need when we need it. We are reluctant to put any of our equipment on the list to be taken elsewhere.

Time and distance were issues perceived to limit the potential for NIMS in rural areas. In the view of most emergency managers interviewed, urban area disaster response frequently exhibits convergence, where many organizations and resources arrive to the disaster site simultaneously making disaster response complex. Theoretically, a system like NIMS that attempts to standardize processes, structures, and terminology, can
overcome complexity caused by convergence. However, emergency managers interviewed viewed convergence as largely an issue exclusive to urban area disaster response. Whereas the convergence of organizations and resources is akin to a flash flood in urban areas, in rural areas convergence is slower like a slow-onset overland flood. This perceived difference in convergence is closely related to the issues of time and distance thereby limiting the need for the processes, structures, and use of common terminology specified by NIMS for disaster response.

Emergency managers reported that the people residing in rural areas have long been aware of the issues of time and distance. In fact, these issues are reflected in aspects of rural culture. Emergency managers viewed the difference in helping behavior between rural and urban areas as a reason that the comprehensive disaster response for which NIMS is designed may not be needed.

I’ve always told the story that in the Midwest if you have a disaster what you get for response is the neighbor showing up and the first thing they’re going to do is put in your hand a casserole and the second thing they’re going to do is help you. In the urban settings, the large urban settings, the first thing they do is stand out on the curb and say help me. And, here we help ourselves.

Furthermore, emergency managers in the areas studied seemed to believe that another aspect of rural culture, self-reliance, will be the critical factor in any response to an emergency or disaster. Should something happen in their jurisdiction, there will not be a national response.

You know if something devastating were to happen here, we are so rural that we’re going to have to handle it ourselves, there isn’t going to be an outpouring from New York and California and all these places, that don’t speak the same language, pouring in here, everyone is going to have to take care of their own.

The final rural/urban issue of significance in emergency managers’ perceptions of NIMS was the seeming inappropriateness of some NIMS components and compliance requirements. Given the different circumstances under which emergency managers operate in urban versus rural settings, rural emergency managers interviewed felt it makes little sense to have the same compliance requirements for urban and rural areas.

When you get out here in a rural county, we’re having to jump through the same hoops as they are in a county that has a million people. There’s no compromise for a small rural county that I can see. We’re having to comply with the same things they are and you know NIMS is great in the
bigger places, but when you get in these small rural counties the structure of NIMS shouldn’t need to be used.

For example, as part of the preparedness component of NIMS, emergency managers are tasked with developing intrastate, interagency, non-profit and non-governmental mutual aid agreements sometimes referred to as memorandums of understanding (MOUs) and memorandums of agreement (MOAs). For most emergency managers interviewed this component and compliance measure was viewed as inappropriate for their areas, but appropriate for urban areas.

[W]e’ve never been refused. If I call [X] and he’s got one, we’ve got it. An MOU wouldn’t do us any good if he didn’t have it. Their view is, “Hey, we are going to help you out”. Now that’s rural America too though. You go to Chicago you better be on contract. You can never count on it.

Position
As hard as they tried to fulfill NIMS compliance measures, emergency managers were constrained by the status, responsibilities, and authority of their positions as county emergency managers. More than two thirds of the emergency managers interviewed were dedicated to emergency management only part-time. Still, all of the emergency managers, part-time or not, have the same number and types of job expectations placed on them—the size and complexity of the tasks are the only things that sometime vary. For instance, all emergency managers are responsible for the following: a) applying for grant funding annually, b) ongoing paperwork and reports related to grants, c) ensuring all training mandates are carried out, d) coordinating response to disasters, e) developing and maintaining plans, and f) working with, providing information to, or training the public, private sector, and response related agencies. As one emergency manager stated,

[T]he thing about rural emergency management is there are probably only 11 or 12 of us in the entire state who are full time. Everybody else is 50%, 40%, 25%, and yet they have the same requirements we do. I have no idea how they can do what’s required, none whatsoever. It is so difficult for us.

Many of the part-time emergency managers also held other positions such as auditor, assessor, deeds, veteran’s affairs, sheriff, 9-1-1 coordinator, fire chief, head of EMS, or were employed in the private sector. For some emergency managers who wore “other hats” it was not a problem to juggle the responsibilities and duties of more than one job. Most, however, found their dual-positions difficult and stressful, particularly given the increase in emergency management responsibilities in recent years.
In addition to the work expectations, not one emergency manager had jurisdictional authority to require anything of the first responders, agencies, or organizations they were supposed to see trained.

And I think that’s where a lot of that is, just where everyone is being force fed, and unfortunately I think the people taking the hit on it are the emergency managers cause we are required to deal with the four hundred volunteers that I got. The feds are telling one person at the local level and that one person is supposed to tell four hundred people that they’re going to do this.

Emergency managers interviewed felt a lot of pressure from the state regarding compliance and implementation of NIMS. They also understood their jurisdiction would not receive homeland security money if they did not ensure compliance. Yet, while they have the responsibility to ensure compliance, they do not have the authority to compel anyone, i.e., “God help the emergency manager that tries to tell the sheriff what to do, or tries to tell the fire chiefs what to do…got a lot of responsibility but no authority to do anything. Ok? All I can do is to ask my public elected officials, “Please try and make this training if you can…” Another emergency manager stated,

Ok, as a whole they are not as well trained as I would like them to be, but so far um well all I can do is offer the classes…which we do. We set them up, and I cannot so far…I don’t have a tool behind me, besides the sheet of paper that says if you don’t do it you’re not going to get funding, so I cannot get out there as much as I would like to, I can’t go out there and force these people into the class, and say listen you need to have this training its good for you…

Though county emergency managers are the point people in their jurisdictions for NIMS compliance and implementation, their position appeared to limit their ability to ensure NIMS carried out.

**Local Conditions**

The data from this research project have shown that the local conditions present in rural counties constitute a set of factors that individually and/or collectively present impediments to NIMS implementation. In contrast to emergency managers’ individual perceptions about NIMS, as discussed above, these factors are coercive on emergency managers when present. Of far more impact than the emergency managers themselves, these local conditions determine whether and to what extent NIMS compliance is undertaken and implemented as designed.
Buy-in

Emergency managers expressed the concern that buy-in was not adequately sought prior to the NIMS mandate and publication of its related compliance measures.

Ok, the federal government has a habit, and the state didn’t care. Ok? And now this is a typical federal government operation. They didn’t come down and say how should we do this, how should we implement it. They came down and said this is a grant, if you want the grant you gotta do this training, and you have to do it to all the fire departments in your community, and your law enforcement... They just kinda gave it to us and said, go do it. So we had to go out and convince the fire departments and the law enforcement then, you need this training. So from that perspective I disagree how they did it.

This lack of buy-in put those expected to implement the policy in an adversarial position with those who designed and/or advocate the policy. Although many emergency managers interviewed attempt to “sell” NIMS it was too-little-too-late for many counties. As one emergency manager weighed in,

Well NIMS, I’ve turned into being responsible with all the training within the different fire departments, law enforcement, and public works, and I don’t like that. That wasn’t what I was hired to do, and there has been a lot of mixed messages coming down...if this was the plan upfront, they should have went to the professional communities like the commissioners, the fire service, law enforcement, and came down through those channels...But no, they didn’t do that.

Organizational Autonomy

Without buy-in NIMS is perceived as coming from the outside and interfering with the local social context. In several interviews emergency managers expressed a personal sense of program ownership, or a sense of ownership on the part of a local first response organization, similar to the sentiment reflected in the cliche, “a man’s home is his castle.” This type of ownership relates to rural survival and sustainability. “And we’re sorta out here on our own, and we sorta survive, and have for years, and will continue to survive, you know?” Ownership is threatened when outsiders wish to impose new rules—rules that may not fit the needs of those who need to survive inside the castle. “So when the feds come in and say you should have done this you should of done that. Sorry Charlie, you weren’t here. You’re from Washington, we live here. We know what works here.” Following along this line, it is not surprising to see certain rural departments or organizations taking an ownership stance.
Fire departments are your last great kingdoms in the United States. Nobody and I mean nobody, and believe it or not even a volunteer fire chief, nobody tells him what to do in his fire district, okay? I don’t care if George Bush calls the [City X] fire department and says, “Send a fire truck.” If that fire chief says, “I’m not sending that anywhere”, it’s not going anywhere. It’s his. He owns it, not the federal government. Now he may not get another federal grant for a couple millennium, but that’s his choice, and it’s totally a volunteer thing.

The fire dept here in [City X] is a good old boys club. They are very strong headed, strong willed on how they do things. I don’t want to say it’s by the book, but it’s not completely unorthodox either on some of the things they do. They have their own little idiosyncrasies that other departments might not and the upper echelon have been the upper echelon for fifty years, from a dad to a son to another son...

Interference with ownership and control by the local emergency manager, much less state or federal government, is not well received by some local first response organizations. “Well you get some of these counties where the sheriff thinks it’s his kingdom and some emergency part-time manager jumps up and says you gotta do this.” Any attempt on the part of government to determine what a local organization does was seen by some as a threat to their control of the jurisdiction.

Emergency managers who work where the preservation of organizational autonomy was a concern appreciated the importance of self-determination to those departments. As one emergency manager stated, “And when you take power, not power, when you take control from locals and start moving it up, it’s sad.” Keeping control at the local level was valuable to the emergency managers, and even more so to many departments with which the emergency managers worked.

Volunteers

In rural areas, volunteers are critical to the provision of first response services, such as fire and EMS, and other county services. Emergency managers were cognizant of their importance and were hesitant to ask too much of them. The reliance on volunteers for the provision of first response services was an important determinant of how emergency management was approached by local jurisdictions.

[I]t needs to be based locally, because what we do here is not what we do in Manhattan or Chicago. I mean it flat just doesn’t work that way, because I have to deal with volunteers, and that is a huge, huge undertaking.
What can, or should, be expected of volunteers where NIMS compliance and implementation was concerned was an open source of frustration among emergency managers. Most emergency managers felt NIMS places an undue burden on volunteers.

Now you tell me, a volunteer fire chief who has a full time job, and I don’t care if he’s a fireman, or works in town at the local bank, or whatever, is going to give up his weekend anytime of the year. I don’t care if it’s hunting season or whatever, if he’s going to give up two days on the weekend to sit through ICS 400, he knows he should go through it, but gosh he’s got a family life. You know that’s when you get in that difficulty of how much can you shove at a volunteer before he finally says I’ve had enough. And our volunteers, volunteer fire and ambulance, people are incredibly important, cause if you think about, okay…if we forced all these volunteers to take these classes, and they all said sorry but no thanks. Now you got one fire department for how big of area of [State X], the upper whole northwest portion of [State X]. So, um those are the difficulties, some of the difficulties that we face with the NIMS implementation.

Emergency managers believed those who are willing and able to volunteer are a precious commodity. Sensitivity to volunteer concerns was further enhanced by the decrease in available volunteers. The states in the study area have been experiencing a population shift—a movement of people from rural areas to out-state and in-state urban areas. With the population movement has come a decrease in businesses, a subsequent lack of jobs, loss of resident young people, increase in resident elderly, and a decrease in the tax base for rural counties (Bartlett 1993; Berblinger 1993; Cromartie 1998; Davidson 1990; DeWitt 1993). It is increasingly difficult for counties to provide basic services because of issues related to population movement. Accompanying this process has been a decline in volunteering. Thus, decreasing numbers of volunteers, unwillingness to ask too much of volunteers in terms of time commitment, and volunteer frustration with NIMS are just a few aspects of one issue impacting the way NIMS compliance and implementation were done in the areas where research was conducted.

The difference between mandating compliance and implementation requirements on a paid professional versus a volunteer cannot be overstated. Beyond the simple fact that volunteers are not compensated for the training they take or job they fulfill, volunteers also have to juggle their volunteer responsibilities with their other social, work, and family responsibilities. Emergency managers reported a growing frustration among their volunteers with training related to NIMS compliance and implementation.
It is just not working, and that is just about where we stand here in our area, and I can pretty well voice my opinion and what I’m telling you now is being echoed by my commissioners and my council and my volunteers.

**Elected Officials**

Elected officials are one of the local conditions emergency managers’ cited as hampering NIMS compliance and implementation. As one emergency manager said, “The problem with public officials is who’s their boss?” The board of county commissioners was seen to be particularly important in NIMS compliance and implementation because not only did the board have to be trained in NIMS themselves, but also because the board had the authority to compel action within the county they represented. The support of the county commissioners was essential to NIMS success. In fact, the county commissioners could virtually halt compliance and implementation in its tracks when they did not fully support NIMS.

I think here in this county, I can’t speak for the other counties in the state, but I think here in this county we are pretty well committed to it, the politicians, county board, elected officials had no problem coming on board with it. I know in some other counties there was some politicians that said, “No, we are not jumping through anymore hoops to get federal money”. So they don’t care if they get the grants.

County commissioners were dependent on being elected to keep their positions. They were, therefore, responsive to what their constituencies found important. As recounted by emergency managers, if local response officials and/or volunteers were outspoken against NIMS, county commissions tended to be responsive to their feelings. As noted earlier, these feelings often reflect a desire to preserve autonomy — a feeling that in and of itself is likely to resonate with county commissioners. In most cases where the county commission was set against NIMS compliance and implementation, the board had been in place for years with little turnover.

If you have politicians that have been on your local county board for twenty years and know they are going to get reelected no matter what they do, what foresight do they need? Maybe some more gravel on the county roads to make people happier. Do they foresee the potential for ag[ricultural]/bio[logical] terrorism in their county? Maybe, maybe not, never happened, never will.

The entrenchment of elected officials was seen, in this research, to be a condition that constrained NIMS implementation. Moreover, the data revealed that county commissions were not as concerned about fulfilling NIMS as they were with the day-to-day
maintenance of their counties and the needs of their counties outside of emergency management.

**State as Buffer**

A local condition that displayed an important but complicated relationship with NIMS compliance and implementation was the influence of the jurisdictions’ state-level Department of Emergency Services/Management. Two of the three states studied acted as a “buffer” between the federal government and county government. In these cases, the state departments were perceived to exert a moderating influence between the federal mandate and the county. The state was under pressure to meet NIMS requirements because of its own need for funding and yet, in two states emergency managers reported state sympathy for their situation that, in turn, encouraged emergency managers expected to participate in NIMS to attempt compliance. “They have probably been good about letting us use it the way we use it. All they are asking is that we make an effort to train people in this”. And, as another put it,

> The state does a real good job here of being a buffer between us and the federal, and they are a bit more understanding about what we need to do and what we can do. …but yeah, the state has been doing real good for us. They are good people to work with, the vast majority of them. They understand what we are up against, but yet they get pressure from the feds.

In the state where emergency managers used words like “pushing”, “forcing”, or “shoving down” to describe the state’s role in NIMS, the local county managers tended to associate NIMS with stress, frustration, and resentment directed at the higher levels of government; and, they reported those same feelings on the part of those expected to participate in NIMS compliance and training.

> Right now, I think it’s mass chaos…I still believe that the feds are out to, to force this down the state’s throat for funding. And of course it’s just going downhill from the trickling down effect, because it already is, we already see it.

Thus, where the state acted as a buffer between the federal and local levels of government, NIMS compliance was attempted with more energy and enthusiasm. However, it was clear that NIMS was being significantly modified in the process even when there was a spirit of cooperation. It was therefore difficult to determine from this research whether or not the state’s role as a buffer was a net positive influence on NIMS compliance and implementation.
Reliance on the State

Some emergency managers felt that NIMS compliance and implementation were not critical to an efficient disaster response in their area. Instead, they expected the state to come in and take over operations like a knight in shining armor should a disaster strike. Where county resources are lacking and where time and distance hamper response operations in disasters it is not surprising that some rural emergency managers would expect the state to step in and render aid in a disaster. Those emergency managers sharing this expectation were not particularly concerned with learning NIMS. Instead, they saw the state as the organization that would be implementing NIMS in a disaster—not them.

If they have a great big incident where we would happen to be involved in for whatever reason they are going to send in their own people. We are just going to be the grunts on the outside anyway. We aren’t going to be command or anything like that.

[W]e had that happen a lot of times and our fire chief was in charge and all of the sudden the states comes and says, “We’re taking over”. Fine. Here it is. Here is what we’ve done. Here is what needs to be done. Now it’s your baby. They have come in and said this is our baby. And we’ve said fine you can have it.

The expectation that the state would “take over” significantly displaces responsibility for response from the local level to the state level. This finding illustrates how one small and taken for granted local condition was an impediment to NIMS. Those in rural emergency management that were part of this study are not going to implement NIMS happily during normal times simply because outsiders have told them to do so (i.e., organizational autonomy), especially if those outsiders are expected to push the locals aside when a disaster actually occurs.

Minimal Compliance Mentality

Among most emergency managers in this study, a minimal compliance attitude towards NIMS was dominant. When probed as to whether emergency managers and responders in the area followed the spirit or the letter of the mandate one manager said, “It’s more the letter. That you have to get these courses and get the certification for the federal government or you’re done with them. It’s basically do it or you don’t get nothing.” Another emergency manager said, “I think they’re just trying to do it for the grant money. I don’t think they really…they’re not all gung ho about it, but they’re doing it”. Training in NIMS, a key component of NIMS compliance, was being “done”, but people were not buying into the key concepts. As one interviewee said, “I don’t think it’s made any difference whatsoever in how we’d respond to disaster”. Another emergency
manager stated, “I think most of them, after they finish their tests and they’re out of there, they’re going back to the way they do it anyway”.

In addition to many other compliance measures, all involved in response were required to have taken NIMS 700, ICS 100 and ICS 200 (at minimum) by the end of the 2007 fiscal year. According to federal guidelines people could take the classes in person or online. NIMS training was an excellent example of the minimal compliance attitude at work. There were numerous reports made by emergency managers of “pencil whipped” NIMS training. These managers stated the departments or organizations doing this did not really learn about NIMS. The possibility of “pencil whipping” on tests made it easy not to take the material seriously.

It’s nothing more, if you think those guys are going to go on what they did or didn’t read, most of them didn’t read the questions, they said what’s your social, what’s your email and put it in, that’s how they got compliant. Isn’t that a sad state of affairs when you think about it? Yes. Well, you know the group will take the tests, keep the tests, and pass them on to the next one. And the ones choosing online, yeah, you know where they’re going. They pencil whipped it and the government’s giving them that option.

As long as those needing to be compliant with NIMS training received a certificate stating they completed the course the individual was in compliance and the county emergency management program was, as a whole, that much closer to compliance.

According to emergency managers interviewed, the true test, as opposed to simply completing a class, would be integrating NIMS into day-to-day operations, exercises, and disaster situations. One emergency manager summarized it particularly well.

It’s like…standing by a swimming pool and telling someone how to swim. Now this is what you’re going to have to do when you get in the water, answer these questions for me, you’re good to go! You’re NIMS compliant! Now getting in the water and swimming is another thing. You know, I want you to go in there and I want you to save somebody’s life. You get in there and pull those people out.

Paper and pencil test certification was a poor measure of learning and NIMS training. “So they developed this stupid tool. And all you have to do is go in and say yes. Just answer yes to all the tier one things, and it’s ineffective”. Although the federal government attempts to monitor the progress local jurisdictions make toward complying with NIMS, its measures of compliance do not reflect the knowledge about NIMS of
those involved, the commitment of those involved, their actual incorporation of NIMS into their day-to-day activities, or how appropriate NIMS is for a given jurisdiction.

Emergency managers interviewed commonly referred to the minimal compliance mentality as a “game” that must be played or “hoops” through which they had to jump.

[A]ny time you deal with the feds, there’s a whole lot of creative descriptions made. A lot of game playing. I tell my wife that for as many hoops as I jump through in a year, you’d think I’d be half the size I am.

It’s just a little hoop they put there and when you jump through it you have gone through it and it means nothing. You didn’t get any higher you didn’t get any lower you just ran down the path jumping the hoops. You find a way to get there because the end result is geared to the money and the equipment.

This game playing was something emergency managers felt forced to do. They had to be compliant to get the funding they needed. They also had to work within the parameters set by local conditions. Certain measures of compliance were clear-cut, as with the training measure: Had those expected to complete the training done it or not? Other compliance measures were not black-and-white and while emergency managers could not afford to ignore them, they could and did choose how to interpret the measures.

Selective Implementation

One emergency manager interviewed said, “So, one size does not fit all. It does not fit every disaster. It does not fit every program. The guidelines, maybe yes…but there is a lot times that a lot of those things flat don’t fit”. The vast majority of emergency managers interviewed would have concurred with this statement. Emergency managers viewed NIMS as a “guideline,” “groundwork,” “template,” or “tool box” open for interpretation. “I know how it works. It is a guideline. It is a toolbox. It has a lot of good things”. Another held, “It is a guideline, and nobody in an emergency can remember everything they need to do, and we don’t have the advantage of superman out here to remember all this stuff”. And as a final example, one emergency manager said,

Well you know a plan is written as a guideline, not as hard and fast rules. It just gives you a guideline what your supposed to…cause when you are out there stuff changes so fast. You have to make the decisions, you don’t have to go…I feel that you don’t have to have a book. Okay, this happens, I do this; this happens, I do that. Not everything is going to fit for that. No two things are exactly alike ever. So you just basically go along and do what you have to do when it has to be done.
The NIMS document encourages users to view NIMS as a flexible system able to be expanded or contracted to fit any disaster type, scale, or location—in essence users are encouraged to view NIMS as a toolbox. Taking the analogy further, NIMS components are intended to be like a set of tools with which the users are intimately familiar. In theory, the users know the tools; maintain the tools; know what the tools can do; and, know when the tools are best used. Although users might prefer the hammer (i.e., ICS), they know the screwdrivers, wrenches, pliers, tape measure, level, etcetera equally well. However, this is where the toolbox image fails.

The NIMS “tools” are not understood or appreciated uniformly in the areas studied; instead NIMS is selectively implemented. The general attitude seen by emergency managers was, “Pick and choose what works and discard the rest”. The most common aspect of the NIMS “tool box” utilized by emergency managers interviewed were the most basic ICS concepts—designating an incident commander, checking in before responding, and interoperable communications equipment. In other words, emergency managers saw ICS as the “hammer” and threw out the rest of the tools.

Discussion

The introduction to this article suggested that three broad issues might challenge NIMS implementation: a) local differences, b) standardization, and c) the command and control model underlying NIMS. Each of these issues proved to be intimately related to respondents’ views of NIMS. If the execution of NIMS in a large-scale disaster relies on the faithful and complete implementation of NIMS jurisdiction by jurisdiction, then the emergency management system needs to be aware of and address the issues raised in this research.

Local Differences

Substantial variation still exists among emergency management programs, not just among regions or states, but also within regions and states. Most emergency managers in the three states studied thought that NIMS was being rushed. Respondents’ comments suggested that more time is needed to support implementation and that this additional time should lead to modifications of NIMS for rural areas. Such modifications need to incorporate an understanding of the desire to preserve organizational autonomy, the role of elected officials, structural limitations constraining emergency managers, the role of elected officials in local emergency management, varying models of reliance on the state, and the need for buy-in from the people and organizations expected to implement NIMS.

Variations in the perceptions of and implementation of NIMS have added to the preexisting differences between programs. There were discrepancies in how jurisdictions approached compliance with NIMS and how and what parts of the system were implemented. Perhaps as a consequence of perceived lack of fit to local needs, the
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majority of the emergency managers believed that the responders in their jurisdiction were not well trained or even terribly familiar with NIMS. Local, on-the-ground differences do make a difference in emergency management.

**Standardization**

Beyond the reality of local differences is the perceived need to remain different. The present research reaffirms one of the most basic concepts in the profession and discipline of emergency management—emergency management is first and foremost a local activity. Emergency managers discussed a number of rural/urban differences that present challenges to standardization. The challenges included time and distance between people and resources, reliance on volunteers for the provision of first response services, and unique aspects of rural culture. Furthermore, efforts to standardize—make one size fit all—may interfere with emergency management at the local level (Drabek 1985, 1987, 1990; Quarantelli 1988; Wolensky and Wolensky 1990). Prior research has suggested that differing views of hazards and risks and how to deal with them may make implementation of a standardized approach difficult (Mileti 1980; Wisner et al. 2004; Tierney et al. 2001). The findings from this study support these observations.

**Command and Control Model**

In a seeming disconnect with the first two issues discussed, emergency managers interviewed for this study widely voiced support for the command and control component of NIMs, specifically ICS. Further obfuscating the matter, respondents’ comments made it clear that they did not perceive the need for a strong command and control structure in their areas. These apparent inconsistencies could be explained in two ways.

First, the command and control model in NIMS is designed in part to clarify leadership roles and facilitate relationships, communication, and coordination among organizations and levels of government in emergency management, but perhaps facilitation is not needed everywhere and by every organization involved in emergency management. In the present study, emergency managers believed that conflicts about leadership are uncommon, relationships in rural areas are close, and that both day-to-day situations and disasters would not be improved by the use of NIMS. Whether emergency managers perceptions are correct is a separate empirical question, but to paraphrase W.I. Thomas, “what is perceived as real is (or can be) real in its consequences” (Thomas and Thomas, 1970).

Second, although NIMS is a more comprehensive system than ICS, due to their similar roots in command and control and the shared reliance of NIMS and ICS on standardization, there is a certain amount of cross over between the two systems. The findings from this study resonate with those reported by Wenger et al. (1990) and Moynihan (2007) on ICS who found, among many other factors, issues related to experience, emergency management program capacity, and resources were important to
implementing command and control models. Jensen (2008) and Neal and Webb (2006) found issues with training, and consistency and continuity in NIMS implementation in disaster situations, and these issues were also found in this research in normal times. It is unlikely that these issues would disappear in a disaster situation.

Perhaps the challenges deterring NIMS implementation could have been overcome with buy-in by those expected to implement the system. Similar to the findings of Neal and Webb (2006) however emergency managers felt that buy-in was not solicited prior to the systems mandate; and, furthermore, they did not feel that support existed among the agencies or organizations involved in emergency management to the extent necessary to fully implement NIMS.

Suggestions for Further Research

Knowledge about the possibilities and limitations of NIMS will improve through continued research. Future research should take the local conditions identified in this study and evaluate the extent to which they apply in urban settings. Future research should also examine the extent to which the perceptions of emergency managers influence implementation of NIMS in urban areas. This study was conducted during routine times without the complexity or demands of a disaster. Thus, future research should study the relationship between local conditions, emergency manager perceptions, and the implementation of NIMS during disasters.

Conclusion

The majority of emergency managers in this study interpreted NIMS in a generally positive manner; however, they did so with numerous reservations. The following issues triggered these reservations: the perceived reactive nature of the mandate, the required change in local emergency management programs, the perceived assumptions upon which NIMS is based, the nature of rural/urban differences, and the structural limitations of emergency managers’ positions. Emergency managers recognized that their interpretation of NIMS played a role in how their jurisdiction approached compliance. Arguably even more important however were the constraints imposed by the local conditions within which emergency managers had to work. In the areas studied, constraints included lack of buy-in, the desire to preserve organizational autonomy, reliance on volunteers, wishes of elected officials, the state’s role as buffer, and reliance on the state. According to interviewees, these constraints, individually or in combination with one another, had a determining influence on attitudes toward compliance and investment in the implementation of NIMS. Therefore, although the federal government mandated its expectations and standards for emergency management through NIMS, both people’s perceptions and local conditions dictated the mandate’s interpretation and implementation. Furthermore, these perceptions and constraints appeared to be related to
an approach to NIMS that sometimes involved game playing, a minimal compliance mentality, and selective implementation.

Future research will allow us to more fully understand whether nationally standardized systems such as NIMS are both appropriate and realistic. Assuming NIMS is here to stay; it is not too late to refine NIMS to make it more workable for all levels of government. Incorporating an understanding of some of the issues NIMS faces into training and practice materials at all levels and across organizations will enable practitioners to be better prepared for the challenges of implementing NIMS in all jurisdictions.

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