

Country's first hazmat vehicles rolled out

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The first of the country's 17 hazardous materials/command vehicles has been rolled out by the Fire Service in Christchurch.

The vehicles are equipped to deal with hazardous chemical, biological, and radiological threats.

They are being strategically positioned around the country so they can respond within 20 minutes in major cities and within an hour to the rest of the country, 90% of the time, the Fire Service says.

As well as Christchurch, the vehicles and their equipment are going to Hamilton, Wellington, Invercargill, New Plymouth, Palmerston North, Nelson, Dunedin, Tauranga, Timaru, Gisborne, Wanganui, Whangarei, Hastings, Rotorua and two to Auckland.

Minister of Internal Affairs Minister Nathan Guy says a review was done on the national standards of New Zealand's response units after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the 2004 Manawatu floods.

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"We learnt from that, that we always need to keep up with technology. The wonderful thing about this asset I believe is it's going to be a quick response," Guy says.

With around 5,000 hazardous callouts a year, the Fire Service says they needed something multi purpose.

"All of the major incidents in the country are multi agency. They need to be co-ordinated, they need to be managed together and this vehicle gives all of us the capability of doing that," says National Fire Commander Mike Hall.

Hall says the roll out is the culmination of five years of planning and design and all regions should have their hazmat capability fully operational in time for next year's Rugby World Cup.



The hazmat/command capability will provide New Zealand civil and emergency response agencies with a national, strategic asset, Hall says.

The technology on board each vehicle includes a large touch screen monitor, software to support emergency command and control decision making, capability for up to six work stations, satellite communication and a camera mounted on a 10.5m mast to allow those inside the command vehicle to get a bird's eye view of the incident ground.

"These vehicles and everything they contain, including new disposable splash suits and hazardous materials detection, identification and monitoring equipment, reflect the latest in international best practice," Hall says.

"Much of the design has been done by the Fire Service and the vehicles and their crews will be able handle any chemical, biological, and radiological hazards likely to be faced by our personnel, the public or other emergency service."

Each vehicle will carry a decontamination corridor which has two lanes to allow emergency service staff or members of the public to be processed very quickly, with full privacy and using warm soapy water.

"Our decontamination corridors are a scaled down version of the mass decontamination processes that were developed after the 9/11 terrorist attacks," Hall says.

"We are the first country in the world to use these mass decontamination principles for a business-as-usual emergency response."