

# Why didn't Northern Californian county governments use Wireless Emergency Alerts to warn residents of breakout wildfires?

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Over a week has passed since the most devastating fires in California history ignited Northern California. The death toll is still climbing, reaching 40 as of Sunday night. One hundred and seventy two people are still missing in Sonoma County, the hardest hit of the four affected counties, and another 74 are unaccounted for in neighboring Napa County.

Neither Napa nor Sonoma counties alerted residents of the fires through Wireless Emergency Alert (WEA) systems. Despite the fact that such technology is readily available, many of the dead and injured were caught sleeping, completely unprepared for what was coming. In some cases the victims did not hear horns or the desperate knocking of neighbors. Many rural residents beyond the reach of local police departments were left with no warning at all, their limited escape routes quickly engulfed by flames.

But the *Washington Post* reported yesterday that in neighboring Lake County, due north of Sonoma, local officials did send out an emergency blast that activated all cellphones, “turning them into the equivalent of squawking alarms.” Untold lives were saved by this activation of the WEA. Lake County is the only affected county that has reported zero fire deaths.

According to the *Post*:

“Of the four counties in Northern California where residents were killed in fires this week, two—Sonoma and Mendocino—had agreements in place with FEMA that enabled them to send alerts. Yuba and Napa counties did not, according to federal records.”

In Sonoma, local officials justified their failure to activate wireless notification on the grounds that it would produce mass panic and “because the warning is not targeted,” a county spokesperson said, adding, “to keep everyone safe we chose not to use a mass alert that would have reached areas not affected by the fire.”

The result was a nightmare. In Santa Rosa, the largest city in Sonoma County, the smoke and heat of approaching flames woke people in residential neighborhoods shortly

after 1:00 AM. “Something told me, death, go, leave,” Julie Pilacelli, a resident of Santa Rosa’s Hemlock Street told the *Los Angeles Times*.

By 1:30 AM, most of the of Pilacelli’s neighbors were waking each other up and fleeing their homes. There had been no warning, no phone calls, no alarms. Eventually a lone patrol car with a megaphone but no alarm sound drove up Hemlock telling people to leave. “We were left high and dry,” said Jimmy Warren, also of Hemlock Street. “No one was there to help.”

County officials claim that warning the population would have clogged roads, but they have offered no explanation as to why emergency services did not have a county-wide evacuation plan in place to prepare for the inevitability of large fires, a common occurrence in rural and semi-rural parts of Northern California.

This week’s fires have far surpassed previous fires in death and destruction because unlike previous rural wildfires, these were able to approach densely urban areas. In this case, entire residential neighborhoods were left sleeping without warning as flames swept down from the hills despite the fact that they are situated right next to highways and would have been easy to evacuate with proper warning.

A FEMA spokesperson told CNN on Saturday that contrary to Sonoma County government claims, agencies sending emergency notifications *do* have “the option of providing geographic coordinates defining the area where the alert is to be targeted” with basic information like the location of cell phone towers.

In response, another Sonoma County spokesperson gave residents cold comfort then she told CNN on Sunday, “It’s something we’ll absolutely be looking into as part of our after-action plan.” Sonoma County already has WEA capabilities, unlike Napa, which has reportedly not used WEAs.

Even those who did sign up for the alerts often received

notice several hours after the flames had enveloped their neighborhoods. A reader of the *World Socialist Web Site* reported that his family in Sonoma County was only alerted of approaching fires by a call from a neighbor and barely made it out alive. Three hours after the family evacuated, they received their cell phone evacuation notice from the county.

Many elderly people were evacuated from residential nursing homes with just minutes to spare and without public warning. The *San Francisco Chronicle's* growing list of the dead includes many elderly or infirm people who may have been able to survive had they been warned and evacuated in a timely manner.

Different levels of local and state government have responded with a blame game. Governor Jerry Brown also has the capacity to activate the warning system, but administration officials sought to pass the buck on to local officials: "From the state level we wouldn't do that," said Kelly Houston, deputy director of the Governor's Office of Emergency Services. "Alerts and warnings happen on a local level...They decide what are the appropriate alerts for their population."

Sonoma County Sheriff Robert Giordano in turn blamed residents for failing to sign up for an emergency alert system that sends out texts in emergencies. "If you don't sign your cellphone up, you don't get that service," Giordano said. "So the message is, sign up for SoCoAlerts if you live in this county."

On Friday, a Sonoma County spokesman said that only 2 percent of the county's 500,000 residents signed up for the emergency warning system, an indication of how little was done by the government to advertise the system.

Lake County officials explained their decision to activate the WEA system was simple: "We had folks that were in immediate danger, and wanting to notify them of the situation," Police Lt. Corey Paulich said. Lake County regularly sends out WEAs for weather and criminal alerts. The county also uses an app called CodeRed which notifies residents of impending disasters. In short text messages, Lake County residents were told where the fire was and where their assigned evacuation center was located.

According to the federal government's Ready.gov emergency preparedness website, WEAs "look like text messages, but are designed to get your attention and alert you with a unique sound and vibration." They "are no more than 90 characters, and will include the type and time of the alert, any action you should take, as well as the agency issuing the alert." They are simple, cheap, and effective, often used to send "Amber alerts", warning drivers to be on the lookout for child abductors.

Sonoma County's decision not to activate the WEA for

fear of causing panic is not a justified "spur of the moment" judgment call. It betrays the government's incompetence and its lack of confidence in its own evacuation emergency plans. Moreover, the county's fears of causing panic indicate that county officials and police feared that social tensions in the county—and particularly in the working class and immigrant neighborhoods of Santa Rosa—have reached the point that a panic would produce riots or looting.

There is no telling how many lives would have been saved had the county governments flicked the switch and activated their warning systems. There is a telling difference between the lack of emergency preparations for natural disasters and the massive degree of government preparation in response to peaceful demonstrations against police violence, for example.

As in Houston after Hurricane Harvey, the task of saving lives and property falls to the working class. Thousands of firefighters have converged from all over the country into a veritable army that is combatting the flames in multi-day shifts. These firefighters continue to risk their lives to control the flames and have contained several of the fires. Despite the firefighters' best efforts, high winds Saturday whipped up new fires like the large one that has now engulfed the Mayacamas mountain range, threatening the small towns of Kenwood, Glen Ellen, and Oakmont.

Reports indicate that up to one-third of all those fighting the flames are prisoners, paid just \$1 per hour for the extremely dangerous job. Residents of the affected towns greet firefighters with massive rounds of applause wherever they are sighted in public and have even gathered to keep residents quiet in areas where firefighters are sleeping. Fire departments have had to issue public statements asking that the public cease donations of food and drink on account of the already overwhelming showing of public support.

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