

Verizon throttled emergency data during California wildfires

By Henry Allan
25 August 2018

The second record breaking fire season in a row has been disastrous for the people of California. With dozens of wildfires continuing to rage across the state, tens of thousands have had to evacuate. Statewide, over 1,100,000 acres have burned, more than seven times the average for this point in the fire season. The speed at which the fires have occurred and the lack of effective emergency planning have resulted in fourteen deaths.

While many workers have lost their homes and lives, telecommunications giant Verizon has seen the disaster as an opportunity to make some extra profits. In the midst of fighting the Mendocino Complex Fire, the largest in state history, Verizon began throttling the mobile data of the Santa Clara County Fire Department and began haggling to sell them a more expensive plan. Verizon customer service initially offered to bump their \$37.99 a month plan to \$39.99 to get the data speeds restored. After the fire department noted it required a plan that does not have “throttling or caps of any kind,” Verizon upsold them to \$100 for the first 20 gigabytes (GB) and \$8 per GB after.

Fire departments across the state rely on continuous streams of live data to dispatch the limited resources available to combat unprecedented wild fires across the state.

“This throttling has had a significant impact on our ability to provide emergency services. Verizon imposed these limitations despite being informed that throttling was actively impeding County Fire’s ability to provide crisis-response and essential emergency services,” Santa Clara County Fire Chief Anthony Bowden wrote in a public statement.

“The Internet has become an essential tool in providing fire and emergency response, particularly for events like large fires which require rapid deployment

and organization of thousands of personnel and hundreds of fire engines, aircraft, and bulldozers,” Bowden explained.

Bowden used his statement to directly accuse Verizon of taking advantage of such emergencies with the intent of pushing public service agencies into more expensive rate plans.

“Verizon representatives confirmed the throttling, but rather than restoring us to an essential data transfer speed, they indicated that County Fire would have to switch to a new data plan at more than twice the cost, and they would only remove throttling after we contacted the Department that handles billing and switched to the new data plan,” he wrote.

“In light of our experience, County Fire believes it is likely that Verizon will continue to use the exigent nature of public safety emergencies and catastrophic events to coerce public agencies into higher-cost plans, ultimately paying significantly more for mission-critical service—even if that means risking harm to public safety during negotiations.”

According to Bowden, this was not the first time Verizon had throttled firefighting efforts in Santa Clara County. In the fires of the previous December and in June, e-mails and documents reveal similar actions. Although firefighters communicated directly with Verizon about the throttling, requesting it be immediately lifted, the internet giant did not immediately restore full speeds to the devices.

Responding to Bowden’s statement, Verizon declared that throttling the fire department’s Internet access during an emergency was entirely legitimate. “We made a mistake in how we communicated with our customer about the terms of its plan. Like all customers, fire departments choose service plans that are best for them...Under this plan, users get an

unlimited amount of data, but speeds are reduced when they exceed their allotment until the next billing cycle.”

Once the FCC revoked net neutrality in June of this year, Internet providers like Verizon began imposing more throttling than previously. According to the Santa Clara Fire Department, it was throttled at all times once their devices went over 25 GBs a month. “Unlimited” data, according to Verizon, does not mean “unlimited,” with all plans having throttling built in. Whenever thresholds are breached, Verizon says the department would have to pay by the gigabyte to avoid being throttled entirely. The federal government’s decision to deregulate the broadband industry has limited consumers’ rights to sue internet providers over unjust or unreasonable behavior. Verizon denies that throttling has anything to do with net neutrality issues.

Bowden’s statements were submitted as an addendum to a brief filed by 22 state attorneys general that seeks to overturn the repeal of the net neutrality rules in a lawsuit against the Federal Communications Commission in the US Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit Court in Washington.

As of Friday, the Mendocino fire had burned more than 422,000 acres and was only 74 percent contained. Mandatory evacuations were issued for areas extending from east of the Lake Mendocino County Line to the boundaries of the Mendocino National Forest and in Colusa and Glenn counties.

Advisory warnings included all areas east of the Mendocino National Park and west of the East Park reservoir between the Glenn County line and Lodoga. Fires near Hopland, also in Mendocino County, were only contained the day before with 48,920 acres burned. In Shasta County, the Carr fire which killed eight people, destroyed over 1,000 homes and burned 230,000 acres is still burning.

The smoke from fires has adversely affected air quality and human health throughout the state. The Bay Area has experienced region-wide air quality warnings stemming from the fires. Smoke from fires has been linked to major health problems including asthma attacks and heart problems.

Widespread fires are being experienced in many parts of the world due to climate change and accompanying heat waves and drought conditions this summer. In British Columbia, Canada, a state of emergency was declared on August 15 as over 500 wildfires burned

across the province. Fires continue to burn across Europe from Sweden, Norway and Finland to Portugal, Spain, Greece and Britain. According to the European Joint Research Centre, already an average of over 3,500 square miles burn each year across Europe.

According to a recent report in National Geographic, not only are humans causing more fires, lightning strikes are expected to increase as the climate warms. More lightning is caused when warmer, more turbulent air leads to more thunderstorms. Lightning-induced fires are becoming much more common across the northern part of the North American continent. Since 1975, these fires have increased by two to five percent each year.

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