

## Sonoma County, Calif., Officials Will Err on the Side of Caution with Future Emergency Alerts

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(TNS) — Sonoma County’s top elected and administrative leaders all agree if another major disaster struck the region today, one key aspect of their response would be different than when the historic wildfires ignited five months ago: They’d use mass cellphone alerts to warn the public about the emergency.

And if rainfall from this latest storm triggered dangerous debris flows in the county’s fire-scarred hillsides, a team of designated staff members would immediately jump into action. Officials are already prepared to send targeted emergency alerts at a moment’s notice to residents living in areas burned during the October wildfires, according to County Administrator Sheryl Bratton.

Regardless of the specific emergency, county leaders across the board say they’d rather send too many warning messages than too few during future incidents.

“We need to use every notification tool available to us,” said Supervisor Lynda Hopkins. “The fact that the decision not to utilize (Wireless Emergency Alerts) was made ahead of time, without any kind of oversight from the Board of Supervisors or clear policy

direction, is unacceptable. I don't think that would be the case if a fire were to break out tonight."

The shift on alerts is one clear change to emerge after a week in which the county faced a crescendo of outside and internal criticism over its handling of emergency alerts during the initial firestorm. First came the release of a formal state review that found the county lacked "reliable, timely and coordinated situational awareness" about the severity of the firestorm. The report also said the county's failure to force warning messages onto the cellphones of people in harm's way was based on a "limited awareness and understanding" of the system that sends such alerts and "outdated information" regarding its technical abilities.

On Tuesday, the Board of Supervisors took up that report as officials aired misgivings about the county's response in the first public meeting dedicated specifically to emergency warnings and other disaster infrastructure. Supervisor Susan Gorin leveled the harshest assessment, suggesting the county's lack of coordination and shortfall on notifications made a catastrophic firestorm even deadlier.

"We could have saved lives if we'd had a better system of alerts," Gorin said. She wept as she recalled tales of escape by friends and constituents who said they were never warned by local authorities of the fires.

In an effort to build on lessons learned in the disaster, the county has implemented several changes to its emergency operations as it considers others recommended in the state review or any that might come from an internal, "after-action" report now being compiled through interviews with dozens of county staff members and others involved in the fire response.

Officials said they will now maintain a "warm" emergency operations center, meaning several staff members will be on call when forecasts call for conditions that might spark emergencies, such as the hot, dry, windy weather that came in October or big winter storms of the type seen last winter. With that system in place, officials have sketched out varying levels of emergency response that could be more quickly activated by Bratton — who as county administrator is the emergency chief — or someone else she designates. The procedures could be used for natural disasters as well as public safety emergencies such as a mass shooting or terrorist attack, county officials said.

Separately, the county's independent fire and medical dispatch center, REDCOM, has developed a script for its 911 call takers to help people trapped by uncontrolled wildfire — a tool that overwhelmed dispatchers didn't have in October. REDCOM's director said they also are exploring ways to improve collection of reports from authorities and witnesses of a large-scale disaster to more immediately inform emergency responders and the public.

Additionally, county emergency staff have developed 90-character emergency message templates they can send out to cellphones during earthquakes, tsunamis, flash floods and red-flag warnings, according to Bratton. The county has granted officials from other agencies, including the Sonoma County Sheriff's Office and Santa Rosa, access to

the Wireless Emergency Alerts system that can force alert messages onto cellphones during emergencies, Bratton said.

County officials plan to use that system during all future disasters, reversing a controversial decision by the now former emergency manager to shelve the tool out of concern that it could not be targeted to affected areas. The state Office of Emergency Services said in its independent review that decision, made about a year before the firestorm, was based on “outdated information” regarding the system’s technical abilities.

“I think the public expects more information and not less, obviously,” Bratton said. “We want to meet that expectation.”

Supervisor James Gore, the board chairman, has said the county was “ grossly underprepared” for what he called the “new normal” of potentially catastrophic fire conditions, often signaled by red-flag warnings issued by weather forecasters.

Moving forward, Gore said in a recent interview, he’d rather have people complaining “about getting too many alerts” than “living in a fire zone and not even knowing if there’s a damn red-flag warning — or what it means to have a red-flag warning.”

Supervisors are also considering a wide range of other changes to the county’s emergency response process, including the use of sirens to warn the public about fires, giving themselves more oversight duties during disasters and possibly hiring additional emergency staff.

Supervisor Shirlee Zane wants to have a more extensive public discussion about shifting the emergency services division, currently overseen by Bratton’s office. Instead, it could be organized under the Sheriff’s Office to help with more coordinated decision-making with law enforcement and first responders, Zane said.

“That’s absolutely essential in emergency response,” Zane said. “ You need a military chain of command when you’re dealing with a disaster.”

Bratton said her office is working on a few proposals for shifting the emergency management division. She hopes to bring the issue back to supervisors within the next couple of months.

Still, Hopkins called it “a shame” that supervisors had yet to implement more systemic changes to the county’s emergency response system. She said officials had been “drowning in fire recovery” for the last five months and stressed they had made progress responding to immediate needs such as the permitting process for home reconstruction, lobbying state lawmakers for help with lost property tax revenue and pressing the federal government to pick up a greater share of the cleanup costs.

And just by working through October’s fires — the most destructive and deadly in state history — county staff members gained invaluable experience they can draw upon should another major emergency break out, said Supervisor David Rabbitt, the board’s vice chairman.

“A thousand things would change if something were to happen today, and that goes beyond even having to have a drastic policy change,” Rabbitt said. “I’ve talked to all the

different department heads, whether it's on how they would react to something today and take a better approach to what they did ... or at least reaffirming what they were doing, tweaking what they were doing, adding to it. I think all that has been brought to the forefront."

The county is expected to conduct a more thorough, written revision of its emergency response guidelines, as the state emergency office recommended in its assessment. Hopkins stressed the importance of that step, urging that formal policy changes be made, noting that two deputy county administrators — Peter Rumble and Rebecca Wachsberg — who were central to the emergency response over the three-week fires have since moved on to new jobs outside local government.

"I will not be confident until there are clear policy changes," Hopkins said. "We need to create institutional change and procedures so that, no matter who is operating (the emergency operations center), there is a clear sense of the roles and responsibilities and a clear change of command and clear oversight from people who are elected officials."

Gorin said she wants the county to embrace advanced technologies such as fire detection cameras that could help authorities get a "fuller picture" of fast-moving emergency situations. Gorin, who on Tuesday said she was "horribly disappointed" in the county's alert systems, said those systems — in tandem with community education efforts — could be critical in getting residents out of harm's way.

"Those few seconds, those few minutes could make the difference," Gorin said in an interview. "We have to work on a system that people will have faith in and respond to immediately, and that's going to be difficult, because that's a behavioral change and a human change that we need to make."

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