

# Emergency alerts get scrutiny after deadly wildfires

October 12 2017, by Brian Skoloff And Michael R. Blood

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Cars crowd the streets as residents evacuate Sonoma, Calif, Wednesday, Oct. 11, 2017. With fires getting near, the town was placed under a voluntary evacuation order.(AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli)

Communities in wildfire-prone Northern California have an array of emergency systems designed to alert residents of danger: text messages, phone calls, emails and tweets. But after days of raging blazes left at least 23 dead, authorities said those methods will be assessed.

The fast-moving fires, strengthened by fierce winds and nearly absent humidity, began to burn through the state's famed wine country Sunday night. Counties used a variety of ways to send out warnings, but the alert systems rely on mobile phones, landlines or the internet to rouse residents.

State fire officials Wednesday said that while the current priority is getting people out of active fires, they would be following up on the methods used and whether it was even possible to reach everyone with so little time to react.

"People were in bed, asleep at midnight, and these fires came down on these communities with no warning within minutes," said state fire agency Chief Ken Pimlott.

"There was little time to notify anybody by any means," he added.

In emergencies where a few minutes or even seconds can save lives, the notification systems have inherent blind spots. Not everyone will get the message. Sonoma County uses a service that sends out text messages or emails when an evacuation is ordered, but residents have to sign up to receive them. The county also uses a mobile phone app that can receive messages, but again it requires a resident to opt-in to participate.



An empty Lincoln Street is shown after residents evacuated Calistoga, Calif., Wednesday, Oct. 11, 2017. The entire historic town of Calistoga, population 5,000, was evacuated. In neighboring Sonoma County, authorities issued an evacuation advisory for part of the town of Sonoma and the community of Boyes Hot Springs. By that time, lines of cars were already fleeing. (AP Photo/Jeff Chiu)

The county can also trigger automated emergency calls to landlines in an area threatened by fire, but that would only reach homes with those phones.

The Sonoma County Sheriff's Department said the county's emergency alert service texted thousands of warnings to residents to flee Sunday night. However, nearly 80 cellphone towers were knocked out or badly damaged, officials said.

Some evacuees escaped only when they realized the fire was nearly at

their doors.

David Leal was at his home in Santa Rosa about 11:30 p.m. Sunday when strong winds began stirring and he smelled smoke. Growing increasingly anxious, he called a fire dispatcher but was assured that there was no need to worry unless he saw flames. He looked outside and didn't, so he and his wife went to bed.



Jonathan Beene, of Alameda, Calif., visits his 90-year-old mother, Rose Beene, at a Tubbs fire evacuation shelter, Wednesday, Oct. 11, 2017, in Santa Rosa, California. Rose was rescued Monday morning by her caregivers when her senior care home was threatened by a wildfire. (Karl Mondon/San Jose Mercury News via AP)

At 2 a.m., they were jarred awake when a sudden blast of wind knocked a lamp off a nightstand. Leal looked out at neighbors who were packing

up to get out. There was never a phone call, or a knock on the door.

"We didn't know what was going on, but just instinct led us to agree on the decision to evacuate," he said.

State Sen. Bill Dodd of Napa said he received an alert Sunday night to evacuate, but by that time he had already decided to get out. His power had kicked off at 10 p.m.

He looked up a hillside by his home and "it was the most incredible fire coming at us," Dodd said. "A lot of it is common sense."



Chris Shiery pets his dog, Ruby, while waiting to evacuate the town of Sonoma, Calif., Wednesday, Oct. 11, 2017. With fires getting near, the town was placed under a voluntary evacuation order. (AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli)

Sonoma County Sheriff Sgt. Spencer Crum was on duty Sunday night when he smelled smoke in the parking lot of the department's headquarters in Santa Rosa. Ducking inside, dispatch calls started coming in about fire in the nearby hills.

He and about a dozen other deputies raced to two rural neighborhoods with sirens blaring and warning residents on their loudspeakers of the fast-approaching blaze. Deputies went door-to-door urging residents to flee.

"Unfortunately, some of them were disbelieving and wanted to argue," Crum said.

When the fire got too close, they raced down the hill to warn others to flee.



Marshall Hayman, 26, and his family stay after a mandatory evacuation order

issued on Wednesday, Oct. 11, 2017, in Calistoga, Calif. He lost his home in Calistoga on the first day of the fire. Three days after the fires began, firefighters were still unable to gain control of the blazes that had turned entire Northern California neighborhoods to ash and destroyed thousands of homes and businesses. (Paul Kitagaki Jr./The Sacramento Bee via AP)

"They didn't need any convincing," Crum added. "By that time, you could see the flames approaching."

Sonoma County also posts evacuation notices on a website, Facebook, and Twitter.

"Various counties use different ways to push information out to the public. And to my knowledge they were used by the counties where they could be used," said Mark Ghilarducci, director of the Governor's Office of Emergency Services.

"I think it's still too premature to determine what actually worked and what didn't," Ghilarducci said.



Lynn Bennett guides her Arabian horses towards trailers to be evacuated on Wednesday, Oct. 11, 2017 in Calistoga, Calif. The wildfires tearing through California wine country flared anew Wednesday, growing in size and number as authorities issued new evacuation orders and announced that hundreds more homes and businesses had been lost. (AP Photo/Ben Margot)

Sonoma County Sheriff Robert Giordano said his office did the best it could to notify people of evacuations after the blaze broke out Sunday, but he acknowledged the limitations in the systems.

"The world has changed. People don't have landlines anymore," Giordano said. "The other thing to keep in mind, the fire was unbelievably fast."





Sonoma County Sheriff Rob Giordano briefs the media at a news conference in Santa Rosa, Calif. on Wednesday, Oct. 11, 2017. Giordano who put the number of people unaccounted for in the hard-hit county at 380, said "We are not switching operations to anything but lifesaving right now, It's all about lifesaving and evacuations," (AP Photo/Paul Elias)

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