

US mobile network limits access to firefighters battling blaze

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Firefighters try to control a back burn as the Carr fire continues to spread towards the towns of Douglas City and Lewiston near Redding, California on July 31, 2018

A US mobile network has come under criticism after severely limiting

service to firefighters battling the biggest wildfire in California's history.

Santa Clara County Fire Department Chief Tony Bowden said Verizon Wireless had hindered the work of firefighters trying to put out the Mendocino Complex Fire by throttling data during the crisis.

The throttling meant data connection was reduced to 1/200—0.50 percent—of normal speed or less.

"This throttling has had a significant impact on our ability to provide [emergency services](#)," Bowden said in a statement that is part of a lawsuit filed this week in a bid to reinstate federal net neutrality rules.

"Verizon imposed these limitations despite being informed that throttling was actively impeding County Fire's ability to provide crisis-response and essential emergency services," he added.

Bowden said that when the fire department reached out to Verizon to inform the company of the throttling, a representative said the department had exceeded its data usage limit and suggested it subscribe to a new, more expensive plan.

The fire chief said the incident with Verizon highlighted the importance of ensuring emergency responders have access to quick data that could prove lifesaving.

"In large and complex fires, resource allocation requires immediate information," he wrote.

"Dated or stale information regarding the availability or need for resources can slow response times and render them far less effective. Resources could be deployed to the wrong fire, the wrong part of a fire, or fail to be deployed at all.

"Even small delays in response translate into devastating effects, including loss of property, and, in some cases, loss of life."

In a statement, Verizon on Wednesday admitted that it had made a mistake and that it normally lifts limits on data usage in emergencies. It added that the incident had nothing to do with net neutrality.

"Regardless of the plan emergency responders choose, we have a practice to remove data speed restrictions when contacted in [emergency](#) situations," it said. "In this situation, we should have lifted the speed restriction when our customer reached out to us."

"This was a customer support mistake. We are reviewing the situation and will fix any issues going forward," the statement added.

Bowden's declaration was submitted in an addendum to a lawsuit filed by 22 states and the District of Columbia to challenge the Federal Communications Commission's decision to do away with net neutrality rules that requires internet providers to treat all traffic equally.

The Mendocino [fire](#) which began on July 27 has consumed nearly 407,000 acres and as of Wednesday was 74 percent contained.

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