

Emergency Alerts and Communication

Response to Grand Jury Report Form

Report Title: Emergency Alerts and Communications

Report Date: June 20, 2021

Response by: Lynda Hopkins Title: Chairperson

Agency/Department Name: Sonoma County Board of Supervisors

FINDINGS: F4, F5, F7, F8, F12, F13, F14, F18, F19, F20, F24, F25

I (we) agree with the findings numbered: **F4, F5, F7, F19, F24, F25**

I (we) disagree wholly or partially with the findings numbered: **F8, F12, F13, F14, F18, F20**

(Attach a statement specifying any portions of the findings that are disputed with an explanation of the reasons.)

RECOMMENDATIONS: R2, R7, R14, R18, R20

Recommendations numbered: R14 have been implemented.

(Attach a summary describing the implemented actions.)

Recommendations numbered: _____ have not yet been implemented, but will be implemented in the future.

(Attach a timeframe for the implementation.)

Recommendations numbered: ~~R8, R7~~ _____ require(s) further analysis.

(Attach an explanation and the scope and parameters of an analysis or study, and a timeframe for the matter to be prepared for discussion by the officer or director of the agency or department being investigated or reviewed, including the governing body of the public agency when applicable. This timeframe shall not exceed six months from the date of publication of the Grand Jury report.)

Recommendations numbered: R2, R18 will not be implemented

because they are not warranted or are not reasonable.

(Attach an explanation.)

Date: _____ Signed: _____

Number of pages attached: 6

(See attached Civil Grand Jury Response Requirements)

Board of Supervisors' Response to Emergency Alerts and Communication

Required Response to Findings

F8. Due to the topography within Sonoma County, the re-institution of audible alarms such as air-raid sirens could dependably reach residents in remote areas and work as a reliable tried-and-true alarm system.

The Board of Supervisors disagree partially with this finding.

In 2018, the Board of Supervisors directed the Department of Emergency Management to explore the potential for development of a network of outdoor audible warning sirens. The Department assessed best practices, siren technologies, systems limitations, vendor products, deployment strategies, initial/ongoing program costs as well as participating in field tests in Sonoma County.

The Department of Emergency Services determined that the effectiveness of outdoor sirens may be compromised by terrain, vegetation, urban development, and ability to be heard inside buildings.¹ Additionally modern building construction – including dual and triple-paned windows makes hearing these sirens very difficult – this effect has been seen in recent community evacuation drills in which vehicle-mounted Hi-Lo sirens were used. Staff will continue to assess the long-term potential for use of outdoor sirens in very specific hazard areas (ex. tsunami inundation zones).

F12. The County communication network is at risk of communication tower/repeater equipment loss through delayed maintenance and failure to update obsolescent equipment, or disaster loss affecting the Sheriff's Department, city, police, fire agencies, and Redwood Empire Dispatch Communications.

The Board of Supervisors disagree partially with this finding

Sonoma County's Telecommunications radio-communications system is maintained by the Sheriff's Office Telecommunications Bureau (T-Comm). We understand that T-Comm has not delayed maintenance and therefore do not agree that the system is at risk due to aged equipment.

F13. There is no backup system for the County communication towers/repeaters or for commercial cellular towers should they fail to function.

The Board of Supervisors disagree partially with this finding.

The County communications towers are maintained by Sheriff's Office and include a robust series of backups, in the event of primary power loss. All county communications towers maintained by the Sheriff's office have backup generators with enough fuel to power the tower for at least 10 days in addition to battery backup systems.

In regard to commercial cellular towers, the County, through a joint effort with other local governments, was successful in 2020 in petitioning the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) to require that telecommunications providers provide state and local emergency responders with information directly about the areas that have lost, or may lose, service due to the impacted infrastructure and requiring that outage maps be posted on public-facing websites. CPUC Decision 21-02-029² requires 72-hours backup power for wireless providers in Tier 2 and Tier 3 High Fire Threat Districts – except for those

¹ https://www.midstatecomm.com/PDF/FEMA_guide.pdf

² <https://docs.cpuc.ca.gov/PublishedDocs/Published/G000/M366/K625/366625041.PDF>

facilities which the providers identify in their resiliency plans that don't need backup or are impossible to provide backup.

Per the CPUC map of areas that do not have sufficient backup, there are relatively few in Sonoma County that are at risk from power failure. Vulnerable areas are in dark blue on the CPUC map here: <https://capuc.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=4ffc5f03a0e14f22a28e4f14aca20327> However, without real-time system status reporting, we don't know if this is really what will occur during a major event.

Per CPUC Rulings 18-03-011³, 18-03-011⁴, and Decision 21-02-029⁵, the County of Sonoma has received emergency plans from wireless (U.S Cellular, Verizon, AT&T, TMobile) and wireline communications providers (Comcast, AT&T). The wireless broadband providers have made some progress in developing backup power for key sites but the overall status of this effort is not known.

F14. The County communication towers/repeaters and cellular provider towers are not maintained and protected (including defensible space) sufficiently to ensure alerts and warnings can go out in the event of a disaster.

The Board of Supervisors disagree partially with this finding.

Sonoma County's Telecommunications radio-communications system is maintained and protected by the Sheriff's Office to ensure alerts and warnings go out during disaster.

The County of Sonoma cannot respond to maintenance levels of the commercial cellular provider's infrastructure, equipment or systems.

F18. The Board of Supervisors has not fulfilled its commitment to update the 2014 Emergency Operations Plan by 2018-2019. This commitment was made in response to a Recommendation by the 2017-2018 Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury.

The Board of Supervisors disagree partially with this finding.

While the overall plan has not been completely updated, this finding does not take into account the broad range of emergency planning products developed that directly augment the Emergency Operations Plan (EOP). These products include annexes to the EOP such as Alert & Warning, Evacuation, Pandemic, Extreme Heat, and Public Safety Power Shutoffs (which has been revised twice).

Also, as noted in the Grand Jury report, the County has experienced an extraordinary number and variety of emergency incidents and events in the last several years. These events have forced staff to spend their time and efforts addressing immediate response and recovery missions - which has come at the expense of resources that would have gone into developing a new EOP. As the last 8 months has not required significant emergency response efforts, staff have been able to make good progress on the new EOP which will be the first in California to incorporate a new state requirement to integrate cultural competency and equity considerations.

³ <https://docs.cpuc.ca.gov/PublishedDocs/Efile/G000/M328/K685/328685793.PDF>

⁴ <https://docs.cpuc.ca.gov/PublishedDocs/Published/G000/M343/K633/343633733.PDF>

⁵ <https://docs.cpuc.ca.gov/PublishedDocs/Published/G000/M366/K625/366625041.PDF>

F20. Recommendations documented in After Action Reports following a disaster have not been incorporated into the current Emergency Operations Plans for Sonoma County Department of Emergency Management, the Sheriff's Office, Cities, and fire agencies.

The Board of Supervisors disagree with this finding.

Since 2017, the County has developed several after action reports for wildfire, flood and power shut off incidents. Recommendations and actions from these AARs are a key element of ongoing improvements and program development. The AAR addressing the County's Emergency Operations Center (EOC) in the 2017 Fires has directly led to changes in organization and procedure. A key recommendation was to develop a new EOC facility which has now been incorporated into the County's Strategic Plan and Capital Improvement Plan.

Of course, not all the improvements can be immediately implemented – especially as the historic number and scope of recent incidents has necessarily prioritized response efforts over preparedness. That said, significant progress in implementing many AAR recommendations has been made in the last three years. AARs provide critical input as new plans are developed, new training offered, and new equipment purchased.

By way of example, recommendations made in the Alert & Warning AARs developed following the 2018 and 2019 warning exercises, the 2019 Kincade Fire and PSPS events, and the 2020 LNU and Glass Wildfires have been incorporated into the new Alert & Warning Annex and the larger warning program.

The County's new Emergency Operations Plan, which is expected to be approved by the Board of Supervisors in early 2022, further incorporate many other recommendations made in AARs as do the Annexes for Public Safety Power Shutoff (PSPS) and Evacuation which have already been approved by the Board of Supervisors.

Required Response to Recommendations

R2. By October 31, 2021 the Board of Supervisors review and propose additional alert and warning methods such as air raid sirens and public address systems to put contingencies in place when broadband fails or is not available. (F5, F7, F8, F13)

Recommendation R2 has not been implemented and may not be implemented.

While it is more challenging to provide warning services to some communities of Sonoma County residents (ex. migrant farm workers or deaf and hard of hearing), the County has developed a robust capability to reach most residents which has been demonstrated in the many recent disasters the County has experienced. The key to these efforts is the drive to ensure that public safety leaders can issue timely, accurate, and actionable warnings to all residents and visitors at any time – even if some systems (such as wireless broadband) are compromised.

The County has pursued development of warning systems and technologies that do not rely on wireless broadband. These include:

1. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Weather Radio (NWR)
Frequently used by the National Weather Service (NWS) and broadcast over most of the County, a NWR alert is capable of sending an alarm and very limited information to radios tuned to the NOAA

radio frequency at 162.475. The County uses NWR to target challenging service areas, areas impacted by loss of power, as well as the deaf and hard of hearing community.

County DEM has aggressively pursued use of NWR to provide supplemental warnings to areas not well served by wireless broadband. Some accomplishments include:

- In 2020, the County was selected by the National Weather Service as a tester of the NOAA Weather Radio Non-Weather Emergency (NWEM) Alerting System. Working closely with the National Weather Service, FEMA and the FCC, Sonoma became the first County in the country to launch a successful test alert using this system.
- Additionally, the County was the first in country to be test the NOAA Weather Radio sub-zone test program which will allow us to send more geographically targeted messages using the NOAA Weather Radio system.
- The County and the City of Santa Rosa obtained federal grant funds to purchase and distribute more than 10,000 weather radios to local residents. Additionally, auxiliary warning devices that can be connected to the radios (including visible strobe lights and vibrating bed shakers) have been distributed to residents that are deaf and/or hard of hearing.

2. Hi-Lo Sirens

Hi-Lo audible sirens are now mounted on select law enforcement and other emergency vehicles throughout the County. Their unique tone (similar to a European ambulance) is designed to warn local residents to evacuate and can be deployed into areas which are not served by or have lost wireless broadband capabilities. These sirens have been used to good effect in recent County disaster incidents including the 2019 Kincade Fire and the 2020 LNU Complex & Glass Fires. The Board recently approved funding to install these sirens on County Parks Ranger vehicles.

3. Future Technologies

The County is investigating the potential for new technologies to provide warnings in areas where wireless or even wireline broadband systems are non-existent or vulnerable to disruption. These include expanded use of the Emergency Alert System via satellite television or new methods of harnessing developing satellite-based internet services.

Regarding outdoor audible warning sirens, DEM explored the potential for development of a network of sirens in 2019 and 2020. DEM assessed best practices, siren technologies, systems limitations, vendor products, deployment strategies, initial/ongoing program costs as well as participating in field tests in Sonoma County. DEM applied for federal grant funding to develop a limited siren network but was denied. DEM is continuing to assess the potential for use of outdoor sirens in very specific hazard areas (ex. tsunami inundation zones). It is important to note that the effectiveness of outdoor sirens is often compromised by terrain, vegetation, urban development, and ability to be heard inside buildings.

R7. By March 31, 2022, the Sheriff's Office and Board of Supervisors provide funding to maintain the communication tower equipment/repeaters. (F12, F13, F14)

Recommendation R7 requires further analysis.

On June 18, 2021 the Board of Supervisors adopted the 2021-22 budget. The next opportunity to allocate funding during the annual budget process will take place in June of 2022. The County Administrator's Office will work with departments to determine if projects are warranted and funding is available and will make appropriate recommendations to the Board of Supervisors through the normal budget hearing process.

R14. By October 31, 2021, the Board of Supervisors approve the updated County Emergency Operations Plan. (F18, F19)

Recommendation R14 is currently being implemented.

The Department of Emergency Management is currently developing the new County Operational Area Emergency Operations Plan (EOP) and expects to present it for review and approval by the Board of Supervisors in the 1st Quarter of 2022. Draft versions of the EOP were distributed in November 2021 to County departments and allied stakeholder agencies for their review and input.

Completion of the EOP has been delayed in order to comply with the requirements in the new state law implemented by SB160 which requires incorporating cultural competency and community engagement when developing an EOP as well as efforts to more fully address equity considerations in line with the County's new Strategic Plan. The new plan, as have all the draft versions, will also be translated into Spanish.

R18. By December 31, 2021, the Board of Supervisors adopt a resolution that all major County disaster plans having to do with Emergencies and Emergency Preparedness be considered "Living Documents" to be reviewed and updated on an annual basis. (F18, F19, F20)

Recommendation R18 has not been implemented and may not be implemented.

It is impractical to update all emergency plans on an annual basis. The County currently maintains the Emergency Operations Plan and five current hazard- or function-specific annexes to the EOP. An additional five annexes are under development/consideration. The County also maintains a comprehensive Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP) with 51 annexes for County departments and facilities. It is the intent of the Department of Emergency Management - in coordination with the Sonoma County Emergency Council - to review emergency plans every three years or as warranted.

This recommendation addresses County disaster plans. It is important to note that cities comprise 2/3 of the County's population and each city is responsible for maintaining its own set of emergency operations plans and procedures.

R20. By December 31, 2021, the Board of Supervisors increase the capacity of the Department of Emergency Management's Community Preparedness function in order to effectively engage the greater community in disaster preparedness with groups such as Fire Safe Sonoma, neighborhood groups such as Citizens Organized to Prepare for Emergencies, and Community Emergency Response Teams to foster resilience. (F24, F25)

Recommendation R20 has not been implemented and requires further analysis.

The capacity of the Department of Emergency Management's (DEM) Community Preparedness function has been increased over the last several years. The County's overall capacity to perform essential functions and services is reviewed annually and updated through the County's budget process. Community Preparedness is a Board of Supervisors priority and we anticipate this discussion will take place during budget hearings. DEM is currently applying for federal grants, which would support preparedness efforts including developing Community Emergency Response Teams.