SANTA MARIA TIMES

Santa Barbara County looking at old, new technologies to improve emergency alert system

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Campers climb into a Santa Barbara County Search and Rescue van for evacuation from Circle V Ranch Camp as smoke drifts in the air during the early hours of the Whittier fire on July 8, 2017.

A resident of Tims Road walks one of her horses to a neighbor's trailer as firefighters battle the Trail fire just a quarter of a mile away in Ranch Trail Estates near Los Olivos in this photo from June 2017. Timely emergency alerts are key to saving lives of people and livestock.

Santa Barbara County officials say they are continually exploring old and new technologies and systems to solve problems in the emergency alert delivery system raised by residents following the Bridge fire that broke out June 5 near Highway 154 and Foothill Road in Santa Barbara.

Kelly Hubbard, director of the County Office of Emergency Management, summarized the complaints about hit-and-miss alerts and delayed delivery of alerts to the Board of Supervisors in a June 28 report.

She also explained the complex process of preparing and sending alerts and how third-party agencies can affect who receives alerts and when they receive them.

Hubbard said, however, that the county isn't simply sitting on its hands with a "that's just the way it is" attitude, but is actively searching for ways to integrate old-school methods as well as new technologies.

Some solutions are not viable because of the costs involved that would result in unacceptable inequalities in who could receive notices of impending emergencies.

Others involve the use of systems already employed by other agencies and require negotiating changes to their systems and agreements for their use that have slowed progress.

Still others might streamline internal processes but wouldn't address the sources of residents' complaints, Hubbard said.

“A lot of the issues that we had were from the receiving end,” Hubbard explained, noting that the county is taking a cue from the Montecito Fire Protection District, which has its own low-power AM radio transmitter.

“We’re working on one for the county,” she said.

Continual radio broadcasts

Purchased with grant funds in 2008, the Montecito Informational AM Radio Network at frequency 1610 continually broadcasts emergency preparedness information from a rotating playlist until a threat arises.

Then, linked with the county’s ReadySBC Alerts system, it provides residents with information they need to respond to wildfires, flash floods, earthquakes and other emergencies with messages that can be created and inserted into the broadcast remotely by fire personnel in the field using cell phones or the internet.

Montecito will test the ReadySBC Alerts system at 11 a.m. July 21.

The county is also still working with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration on using the federal agencies weather radio system to send out alerts.

NOAA uses several specific frequencies to continuously broadcast weather reports and forecasts, but the county would like to use those for emergency alerts.

However, that would require each resident to have one of those radio receivers.

The cheapest type must be manually turned on to receive broadcasts.

“I like the AM/FM radios that would come on to receive an alert,” Hubbard said, although those are more expensive and might not be affordable to some.

“It’s possible we can use grants to buy them for seniors on fixed incomes and low-income residents,” she said.

'Like a security alarm box'

Recently Hubbard checked into a new system that’s “almost like a security alarm box.” The county would buy a transmitter, and consumers would buy the receivers.

But there again the issue of inequality arises in the cost of the receivers that many might not be able to afford, she said.

This week a potential solution was pitched by Rusty Prince, chief of architecture and development for Counterspherics Inc., a California-based, disabled veteran-owned business that with Specialized Safety Services in Riverside, developed MERLENN.

An acronym for Multiple Emergency Response from Linked Emergency Notification Networks, MERLENN is software pre-installed onto a Microsoft Windows 10/Intel-based laptop and configured to only run that software.

The system is portable and can be used by fire, law enforcement and other personnel in the field to send alerts but does require an internet connection.

Beyond alerts

Prince said MERLENN goes beyond simply sending alerts.

“MERLENN is more than an alerting system, as alerting is just a component of the system,” he said. “It has emergency supply inventory management, human resource (incident) management, OSHA safety, drill simulation, management, human threat of violence prediction based on FBI and Secret Service findings, HAZMAT spill reporting, casualty tracking, family reunification planning, and more.”

Hubbard said she wasn’t familiar with the MERLENN system, so it was hard to say whether it would solve some of the county’s emergency alert problems or not, but she planned to look into it to see if it could be useful.

“New products are always popping up in this arena,” she said, noting the county is always investigating new possibilities.