

Senate Bill 833

Red Alerts: Statewide Emergency Alert Protocols

Senator McGuire, Dodd, and Hill

Summary

The size and scope of wildland fire events in California are only getting worse, and the Golden State is facing a new normal when it comes to these fire events. 2017 was an unprecedented year for wildland fire events in California; the North Bay Area Firestorm is ranked as the most destructive and deadly in American history with 44 lives lost and some residents still missing. Last year also saw the largest wildland fire in our state's history with the Thomas Fire in Southern California and the mudslides that followed, tragically killing at least 21 residents.

Through all of these massive disasters, it has become clear there are shortcomings in our emergency alert system and residents deserve timely notifications and up-to-date information. Lives depend on the Legislature and Governor taking swift action to ensure that statewide emergency alert standards are adopted, additional training is implemented and more funding is secured so that communities big and small have reliable alert systems deployed.

There are currently no statewide standards for how emergency alerts should go out, and that has led to inconsistency on how residents are notified for evacuation. SB 833 will create statewide protocols that will make sure all tools available are used during future natural and man-made disasters and ensure residents have the information they need to stay safe.

Background

The firestorm that ravaged Sonoma, Napa, Lake and Mendocino counties destroyed over 6,000 homes, and scorched more than 170,000 acres, causing billions in damage and resulting in the death of 44 residents. The Southern California wildfires of December 2017 burned over 307,000 acres, including the Thomas Fire, which is the largest wildland fire in California's modern history, burning 281,893 acres.

The federal Wireless Emergency Alert (WEA) system is a public safety system that allows residents who own certain wireless telephones and other enabled mobile devices to receive geographically targeted, text-like messages alerting them of imminent threats to safety in their area. The WEA system was established in 2008 pursuant to the federal Warning Alert and Response Network (WARN) Act and became operational in 2012. Since then, over 21,000 WEA alerts have been issued.

Problem

In California, we have 58 different sets of procedures and protocols for how emergency evacuation alerts are deployed. With each of the Golden State's counties deploying differently, there is no statewide standard for alerts or the equipment that broadcasts them. This leaves tens of millions of lives vulnerable to an impending disaster.

Thousands of residents were caught unaware that a massive wildland fire, burning approximately 200 feet per minute, was about to engulf their home/business in the North Bay because they did not receive an emergency alert. While there are hundreds of harrowing stories of bravery that night, regrettably, not everyone received a warning. Residents reported that they did not receive emergency alerts either by phone or landline during the peak of the evacuations. After initial review, it has become obvious a statewide standard for emergency alerts must be established.

Solution

SB 833 will create a framework for how large emergency evacuation alerts will go out. Specifically, the bill would:

- Require county offices of emergency management, by July 1, 2019, to have the equipment and WEA software or state sanctioned equivalent emergency alert software.
- Require OES, by January 1, 2019, to establish standards on issuing warnings.
- Mandate that landline alerts must be sent by county offices of emergency management to areas where a WEA or equivalent alert is sent.
- Require ongoing training for personnel within county offices of emergency management that are tasked with using the software.
- Require OES to be notified when the WEA or equivalent alerts are used. Upon receiving notification, OES shall utilize the state-utilized emergency notification systems. This would include, but not limited to, digital highway signs, radio, television, or other technologies, as appropriate, in addition to the WEA or equivalent system of the initial alert.
- Provide funds to counties for the purpose of implementing the bill upon appropriation by the legislature, and allow locals to receive private donations to implement the WEA or equivalent system.

While it may be impossible to stop the new reality California faces with these unprecedented natural disasters, the statewide protocols for emergency alerts created by SB 833 will save lives. California must upgrade from 20th century technology and invest in tools that will help tackle 21st century challenges that threaten the safety of our communities.

Contact

Chris Nielsen, Legislative Director
Office of Senator McGuire
Phone: 916-651-4002
Christopher.nielsen@sen.ca.gov