

Local

Sonoma County to make over emergency operations after Tubbs Fire response blasted

By Peter Fimrite | June 11, 2018 | Updated: June 11, 2018 7:17pm

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...all Valley Road as
Sonoma County Board

of Supervisors approved a restructuring on Monday, June 11, 2018 after a report criticized the county's response efforts to the firestorm.

Sonoma County's Board of Supervisors approved plans Monday for a restructuring of emergency operations after an internal report concluded that emergency workers were unprepared for the October fires, which burned 5,143 homes and killed 23 people in and around Santa Rosa.

The restructuring includes a new, improved wireless alert system that will cause residents' cell phones to vibrate or sound an alarm in an emergency.

County officials drew criticism after they decided last year **not to send out potentially life-saving alerts** as devastating wildfires rolled through local neighborhoods. The lack of warning meant numerous **residents awoke to flames** licking up against their homes, forcing them to flee for their lives with no time to spare.

"It was frustrating. It was over-frustrating," said Supervisor Shirlee Zane, who urged the county to pay special attention to seniors and people with disabilities and include Spanish-language alerts in developing the new communications system. "The people who died in this fire were seniors and disabled."

The report, prepared by county staff, analyzed everything from the operations center to training. It said county emergency workers were overwhelmed, understaffed and not adequately trained to handle logistics in such an emergency. It largely mirrors **a California Office of Emergency Services report** issued in February.

The worst Tubbs fire raged through Sonoma. **Warriors Parade: Fans come out en masse for** **design for SF's public toilets is sleek, shiny and** **New** **Laundry site's historic plaque is reminder of injustice** **fires that** **destroyed** **2 miles into Santa Rosa,**

the Fountaingrove neighborhood, jumped Highway 101 and burned down the neighborhood of Coffey Park.

“The number of fires and the inability to communicate effectively and consistently with public safety agencies on the ground created confusion and uncertainty as to how large the fires were and how quickly they were spreading,” said the report, which focused only on the civilian divisions of county government. “The inability to fully understand current conditions negatively impacted response efforts.”

As the fires continued, workers became overworked, power struggles erupted between county workers, and no liaison officer was assigned among the 200 workers in the county Emergency Operations Center to communicate with elected officials, according to the report.

“We were orphaned in the process,” said Supervisor Susan Gorin, who was especially upset by the lack of communication with cities, community organizations and special districts. “Every request for information we sent to the EOC was met with silence. We couldn’t get any information.”

The overhaul will put in place a countywide emergency warning system, including sirens and wireless emergency alerts, or WEAs. Sonoma County officials said they **did not send such an alert** as the fires raged late on the night of Oct. 8 because it would have hit phones across the entire county, possibly causing panic and traffic jams that would have blocked people from getting in and out of the area.

After **The Chronicle reported on Sonoma’s decision** not to send a wireless alert, Democratic Sens. Dianne Feinstein and Kamala Harris wrote **Federal Commission on Sons Comm** complain. The



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federal government now requires wireless carriers to more specifically target areas with wireless alerts.

Christopher Godley, the interim emergency manager for Sonoma County, said the report should not be taken as an indictment of emergency workers. He said an analysis like this is, by its very nature, critical.

"The county did relatively well in responding to this event," Godley said. "The county did not roll over, fall apart. ... I cannot think of another county in California that would have been prepared."

The supervisors also approved recommendations to strengthen county training requirements, clarify roles and hire more emergency staff.

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Reporter

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