

We need Better Emergency Communication - And We Need It Now!



In most, if not all of the articles I've written for I through the years, I've tried to keep "me" out of the narrative. Our articles are more about facts, and not so much about opinions. But in some cases, especially where the writer is discussing what he or she decided or the action they took and why that is information that is important and interesting. I have had little experience in emergency management since earning the Emergency Preparedness merit badge, and I spent a lot of time trying to learn how our emergency management systems keep us safe to write this article. But because of my perceptions and experiences, it feels impossible to write this article without "me" guiding the path that this article follows as I explored the murky (to me) world of emergency preparedness, management and recovery. None of the companies mentioned are endorsed, recommended, etc.

Now, more than ever, individuals need to be informed of dangerous situations that are moving toward them and their property, or in the alternative, situations that individuals are moving toward. To reach more people, television stations are providing news online and often with text, and

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Smoke, ash and dust still hang in the strong breeze after a wildfire snaked down the South Fork Solomon River Valley west of Stockton in March of 2017. Why the cedar tree windbreak, propane tank and 1969 Ford Mustang were spared is unknown, but all that remains of the farmhouse in the center of this photograph is the metal roof.

newspapers are providing video and fancy graphics. Radio broadcast studios are pre-programmed and empty of humans. It seems that in many places, there is no live person within hundreds of miles of the radio broadcast antennae. "Radio" stations are also going online, fighting for every listener that they can get. The traditional emergency announcement providers, while charged to provide this service and doing it excellently, seem to be ignored by a growing percentage of our population. I'm starting to think that a large population segment is oblivious as to what emergency information they might need.

I can hear it now, from many citizens younger than me, saying that I'm an over-reacting Boomer about to talk about things "back in my day". I enjoy technology as much as anyone, but I'm not ready to cancel my satellite television subscription yet. What I think needs to happen is more encouragement to adopt the new communication tools currently available.

Planned burns vs. wildfires

The Kansas Flint Hills have burned for millennia. The practice of burning the dead prairie grasses and the invasive trees has continued after the prairie was fenced by ranchers. My perception (without statistics) is that the majority of deaths that occurred which are attributable to controlled burning in the Flint Hills was because drivers of vehicles on the Kansas Turnpike were blinded by thick smoke. No one

doubts that it's dangerous to drive 75 miles per hour into a plume of smoke not knowing what's obscured only 20 feet ahead in the plume (although electronic signage states the obvious reminders to drivers not to drive through smoke). I know of no homes or businesses that have burned by a planned fire in the Flint Hills.

My first recollection of a true wildfire in Kansas occurred in south-central and southwest Kansas. The *Wichita Eagle's* March 3, 1996, edition reports that 70,000 acres in Barber County burned and 25,000 acres burned in Meade County. No occupied homes and very few cattle were lost in that event. Then we had the Barber County fire of 2016, the Anderson Creek Fire, which started in Oklahoma and was pushed with 60-mile-per-hour winds across the state line. This fire consumed the vegetation on 700,000 acres or nearly 1,100 square miles in Kansas! Couldn't happen again, you say? The following year in the first week of March 2017, there were 21 counties with wildfires. Houses were destroyed in the counties of Clark, Reno and Rooks. At least 10 communities were under evacuation orders! December of 2021 had the Four Counties Wildfire in Rooks, Ellis, Osborne and Russell Counties. It burned almost 366,000 acres. The Cottonwood Complex fire occurred this March in Reno and Harvey Counties. This fire killed one, destroyed 35 homes and contents,



This Sherman County Fire District fire truck traveled more than 100 miles to assist with the 2017 fire near Stockton. Fire fighting resources were spread very thin throughout western Kansas in 2017 as mutual-aid agreements were honored.

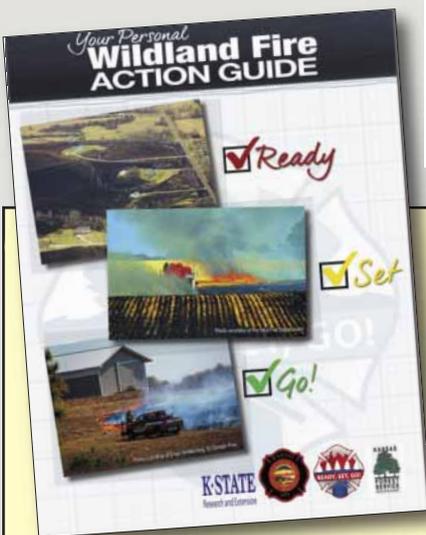
and burned at least 92 outbuildings and over 100 vehicles. Are we experiencing more wildfires than we did in the past? It sure seems so.

It appears to me that we have an excellent system in place to warn us about weather watches and warnings, but does this system work for wildfires? Severe weather impacts Kansans more frequently. Tornadoes, Derechos and straight-line winds, hail, drought, lightning, freezing rain, blizzards, heavy rain, flash floods, and river flooding are more highly regarded as threats here, but there seems to be an increasing trend of high winds with low humidity in late February and early March, where one spark by a chain dragged on the highway or a downed power line can significantly impact public safety. When Red Flag Warnings are posted by the National Weather Service, does everyone get the warning, and do they know what that means?

Currently, new cell phones are sold with government alerts enabled. The most widely known is the AMBER Alert. AMBER stands for America's Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response. It is used to enlist the help of the public to locate abducted children. These governmental alerts can also be BLUE alerts, used to notify the public of recent criminal activity in an area where a law enforcement officer has been injured or killed. Currently, 37 states (including Kansas) have enacted legislation allowing this kind of alert on cell phones and highway message boards. Silver (or Older Citizen) alerts are issued in 36 states. In Florida, one of the criteria for issuance of a Silver Alert is the involvement of a vehicle in

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For personal wildfire protection, download Your Personal Wildland Fire Action Guide to protect yourself, your home, your loved ones, your animals and your property. It includes many photos of former KRWA Board of Directors member Paul Froelich. Get it here:

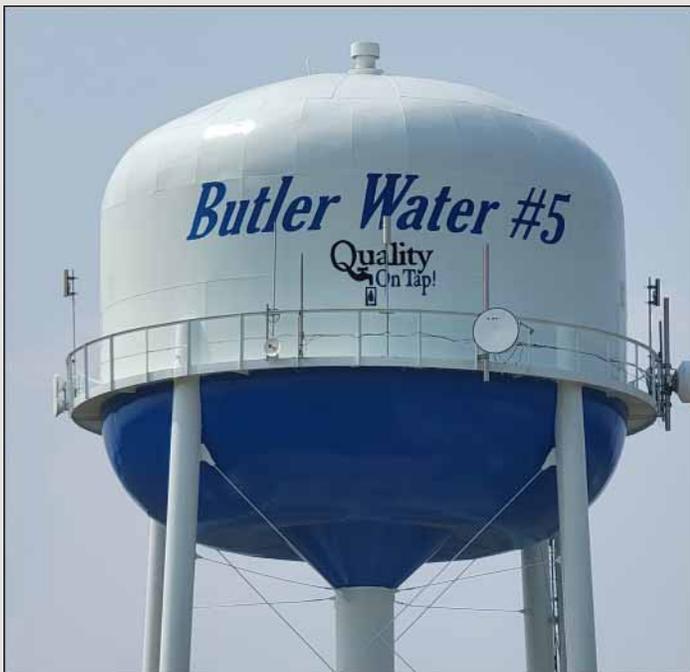


<http://www.wildlandfirersg.org/About/Learn-About-Ready-Set-Go>

the disappearance of an elderly person. Florida averages over 100 Silver Alerts a year, mainly because of their large population of retirees. Texas has additional alerts coded CAMO for missing current and former members of the armed forces, and CLEAR for situations where hostages or other kidnapping victims may be at risk and at an unknown location. These governmental notifications can be disabled by the cell phone owner if the alerts are unwanted.

What else can cell phones do for us?

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has an app for end-users, which can deliver many weather alerts for up to five communities across the United States. The app is simply named FEMA. A cell phone owner can get messages about threatening weather where they and their out-of-town parents and children live. It also has emergency safety tips, a section to set reminders to practice emergency plans, refresh emergency kits, replace batteries in smoke alarms and test them, etc., and instructions on how to build an emergency kit. There's also a section to guide the user after an incident occurs - to get the needed assistance. This app appears to be worthy to be recommended by the local governments and water districts to their app-using local citizens.



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The National Weather Service (NOAA/NWS) does not have an app for the general public but they provide nearly all of the weather data for probably hundreds of other private, governmental and non-profit agency weather and notification apps. Some of these apps have no charge; some have a small fee or a subscription. Not as well-publicized, but only available to emergency managers, community leaders, and government agencies is iNWS. Information about this app may be discussed in a future article. I have requested approval, as a KRWA employee representing local leaders, to use the iNWS system. I was able to draw a map area of my neighborhood for all weather alerts and choose stream gages in my area and near my parent's home. Notifications will be sent to me by text and by e-mail. In late May, I received timely information about rising creeks and rivers in Kingman and Sedgwick counties.

There are a lot of private companies that provide emergency notifications for local law enforcement and emergency preparedness agencies, and service announcements for public utilities and local governments. Information can be delivered to the intended recipients by push notifications, e-mail, text, telephone calls and any or all of the popular social media outlets. Some of these companies are focused on managing damaging events for governments, businesses and utilities; some are focused more on enhanced, efficient and safe government services.

When looking for emergency notifications to be pushed to my cell phone, I could not find anything for Shawnee County specifically. I learned that emergency managers of several northeast Kansas counties added their counties to the NE Kansas Regional Alert and Notification System managed by Everbridge, Inc. The counties in this group include Chase, Coffey, Douglas, Franklin, Geary, Linn, Lyon, Marshall, Morris, Osage, Pottawatomie and Riley. I downloaded the Everbridge app which allowed me to enter my home location (in Shawnee County), and receive emergency alerts from my nearby counties of Douglas and Osage. As part of my research for this article, I also included alerts from the City of Overbrook. Overbrook can (and has in the past) broadcast through the Everbridge app issues such as large water main breaks, road closings, and even reminders about holiday office closings or community celebrations.

Other Kansas counties, individually or as a group, using the Everbridge platform include Barber, Barton, Coffey, Comanche, Edwards, Harvey, Jefferson, Pawnee, Reno, Rice, Saline, Stafford, and Sumner. Some counties may be using other platforms, and some or all of the listed counties may be using multiple platforms. The Everbridge platform appears to require the end-user to download the app or to submit their contact information to the Everbridge website. Everbridge, Inc. advertises itself as the global leader in critical event management (CEM) and national public warning solutions.

CivicPlus LLC, headquartered in Manhattan, Kan., advertises itself as a provider of technology solutions for local governments to create more positive civic experiences with residents. One of their products is named CivicReady. Information from their website indicates that specific map areas can be identified to receive specific information, which can be important for wildfire emergencies and water outages on specific pipelines. The City of Louisburg's Public Information Officer, Jean Carder, provided a testimonial to the company regarding the ease of developing and maintaining the city's website (<http://www.louisburgkansas.gov>). I called her to ask about their experience with the company and whether they were using CivicReady. She said the website experience was great but they are not using CivicReady for notifications. They use SwiftReach to do telephone notifications for street closings, water leak repairs and non-payment shutoff warnings.

What tools are available to reach your customers?

After all of the research on apps and providers, etc., I finally stumbled on the information that I've been looking for, that seems to be kept from the general public. My original question was something like this: "How will anyone notify me that a wildfire started just a few miles away, is growing rapidly, won't be contained for hours, and is headed for my house?" The answer to that question is the Integrated Public Alert & Warning System (IPAWS), under the management of FEMA. Many of the private companies advertise that their platforms for reporting to end-users were IPAWS compliant. Hmmm. "What is that?" I wondered. It IS the tool that is used to alert EVERYBODY that needs to be contacted, even those that take their safety for granted.

Here's how it works. An Alerting Authority determines that a situation requiring public notification exists. The declaration is sent to the IPAWS-Open Aggregator. The Aggregator confirms that the format is correct and that the

sender has the proper credentials. If the declaration is suitable and appropriate, it gets sent to the Private Sector Partner Systems for release to the public. The partners are:

- ◆ The Emergency Alert System (EAS) is comprised of the AM, FM, and Satellite radio broadcasters and the broadcast, cable and satellite television providers
- ◆ The Wireless Emergency Alert System is the cell phone and other wireless communication device network providers
- ◆ NOAA weather radio
- ◆ Other Internet-connected devices (digital highway signs, voice sirens)
- ◆ Future Technology (Gaming Consoles, Home Security Systems, etc.) that has not been invented and developed yet.

Can local governments be alerting authorities?

Yes, a local government can be, and should be, an Alerting Authority, in my opinion. Oddly (another one of my opinions), the IPAWS website shows only 29 alerting authorities in Kansas. Most are county emergency departments. Only three are cities. One of the cities works in partnership with their county. One city is in a county whose county emergency management department is enrolled. One city is in a county that does not participate with IPAWS. Two are Sheriff departments. One is Fort Riley, a federal military facility. One is the Kansas Department of Emergency Management (KDEM), a state agency.

There are 105 counties in Kansas, and there are only 28 local Alerting Authorities? Are you kidding me? Is the

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List of IPAWS Reporting Agencies

- Sedgwick County Emergency Management
- Wyandotte County Emergency Management
- Johnson County Emergency Management
- Fort Riley
- Pottawatomie County Emergency Management
- Anderson County Emergency Management
- City of Coffeyville
- Kansas Department of Emergency Management
- Graham County Sheriff
- Riley County Emergency Management
- Coffey County Emergency Management
- Douglas County Emergency Management
- City of Baldwin City
- Kingman County Sheriff
- Franklin County Emergency Management
- Reno County / Hutchinson Emergency Management
- Lyon County Emergency Management
- Cowley County Emergency Management
- Barber County Communications
- Ford County Communications
- Greenwood County Emergency Management



- Neosho County Emergency Management
- Clark County Emergency Management
- Elk County Emergency Management
- Labette County Emergency Management
- Harvey County Emergency Management
- Wilson County Emergency Management
- Seward County Emergency Management

Much work needs to be done to help communities be more resilient, as the responsibility of preventing wildfires etc., is spread among three state agencies.

Kansas Department of Emergency Management supposed to take care of the remaining eighty or so counties that haven't been trained to be Alerting Authorities? Seconds could mean lives!

I am happy to learn that my local Sheriff and Fire District can contact my local emergency management department who can report a wildfire to IPAWS. I somewhat trust that the system "they" don't tell us about will work, that I would get a warning sent to my cell phone in the same manner an AMBER Alert is sent, through a text, a push notification, with an e-mail and through the notification apps on my phone. I'd like to see a county-wide drill, with plenty of prior notification that a drill was scheduled, to see if my phone would respond appropriately. If we can have a state-wide tornado drill, we can have a state-wide wildfire drill too. I already know where my storm shelter is, but it would take me and my neighbors a couple seconds to determine what to take, who to tell and which way to drive to escape the smoke and flames of a wildfire.

What vulnerabilities scare you at work or at home? It scares me that so many people appear to believe that they will know when it's time to run or time to shelter. It scares

me that emergency management doesn't do more to tell us that we are safe, if we are, or how unsafe we can be if emergency responders are overwhelmed. Please consider if you can do more to protect your water system assets and ask if those entrusted to help you keep your citizens safe are doing all they can. We are depending on you, even if it looks like we've got it all under control.

Before ending this article about emergency notifications and wildfires, I would be remiss if I didn't mention that the Kansas Forest Service plays a large role in fire suppression. Much work needs to be done to help communities be more resilient, as the responsibility of preventing wildfires, etc., is spread among three state agencies. In 2018, the Legislative Post Audit Committee recommended to the legislature that a single agency be formed and that more resources be committed to this effort. To my knowledge, nothing has come out of their review and report.

The Kansas Forest Service recommends that communities participate in the National Fire Protection Association's Firewise USA[®], to make their community safer from wildfires. Unfortunately, it appears that the University Park community on the west side of Tuttle Creek Reservoir is the only community in Good Standing in Kansas. Get more information from the Kansas Forest Service about this program at https://www.kansasforests.org/fire_management/fireprevention.html.

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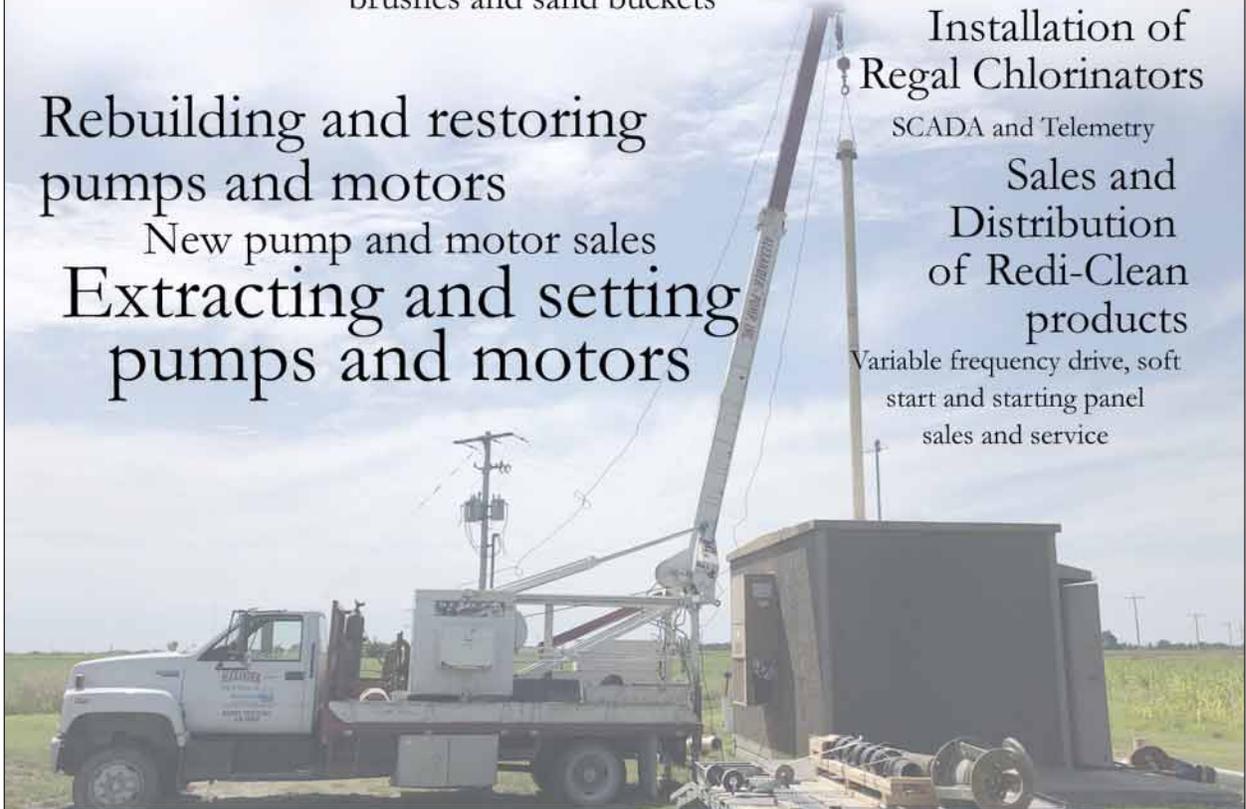
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