



Lucien Canton is a nationally recognized expert on strategic planning for crisis and disasters. A popular speaker and lecturer, he is the author of the best-selling *Emergency Management: Concepts and Strategies for Effective Programs* used as a textbook in many higher education courses.

Prior to starting his own practice, Mr. Canton served as the Director of Emergency Services for San Francisco and as an Emergency Management Programs Specialist and Chief of the Hazard Mitigation Branch for FEMA Region IX.

Lucien G. Canton, CEM (LLC), is a management consulting firm specializing in helping managers lead better in crisis.

Lucien G. Canton, CEM (LLC)
783 45th Ave
San Francisco, CA 94121
415.221.2562
415.520.5218 FAX
LCanton@LucienCanton.com
www.LucienCanton.com

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The Wine Country Fires

A Case Study in Notification and Warning

On October 8, 2017, a series of wildfires, collectively referred to as the "Wine Country Fires" broke out in Northern California, killing 25 people, destroying 5,000 structures, and forcing the evacuation of over 100,000. One of the criticisms leveled at responders was that public notification and warning were inadequate. This was particularly true in Sonoma County where the local emergency management office was criticized for the decision not to activate the Wireless Emergency Alerts (WEA) system that is a component of the Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS).

At the request of the County, the California Governor's Office of Emergency Services performed an independent assessment of Sonoma County's emergency alert and notification system. The recently released [report of the assessment team](#) identified six gaps in the County's warning program that I believe are applicable to similar programs and therefore worth reviewing.

Program Gaps

1. **Confusion over roles and responsibilities.** The plan

distinguished between **alert originators** (those with authority to authorize the issuance of alerts) and **alert operators** (those who had the technical skills to operate the warning tools). However, in actual practice these roles became confused resulting in delays and inconsistencies.

2. **Lack of knowledge on social sciences best practices.** In a recent FEMA PrepTalks discussion, [Modernizing Public Warning Messaging](#), Dr. Dennis Mileti stressed the importance of the content of warning messages, prior planning, and the use of multiple communication tools. Unfortunately, the technical training required to master the available tools used up all available training time and none of the social science best practices had been integrated in plans.
3. **Inconsistent or missing operating procedures and templates.** Detailed procedures for issuing warnings did not specify what warnings were to be issued and when and how they were to be issued. Pre-scripted templates were largely focused on flood evacuation, forcing originators

and operators to create ad hoc messages.

4. **Multiple alert systems created confusion.** In addition to the Federal IPAWS, Sonoma County has two commercial opt-in systems available: SoCoAlert used for emergency notifications and Nixle used by the Sheriff's Office and other law enforcement agencies. There was no coordination of messages between the two overlapping systems and no clear definition of responsibilities for issuing messages, resulting in duplicative or inconsistent messages.
5. **Communications systems and coordination affected situation awareness.** One of the problems in providing warning was lack of situation awareness. Tactical units frequently used limited-range tactical frequencies which resulted in local and county emergency operations centers and county fire dispatch losing track of resources and having an incomplete picture of the status of the fires.
6. **Lack of knowledge of warning systems.** Sonoma County OES has been criticized for failing to activate WEA. However, this was not a decision made "in the heat of battle" but was a strategy discussed prior to the event based on the limitations of WEA. However, public expectations have changed with the advent of social media and this has produced changes in technology. A reliance on commercial systems is no longer adequate.

Improving Notification and Warning

The Governor's OES report offers eleven suggestions for closing these gaps. They are not revolutionary in that they stress planning and training, things that we should be doing anyway.

In his PrepTalk discussion, Dr. Mileti offered five suggestions that reinforce the State's recommendations:

1. **Focus first on alerts and warnings for imminent (rapid onset) events.** This prioritizes those most at risk and maximizes the effectiveness of public warning systems.
2. **Remove delays from the system.** Social science identifies three points of delay: the time it takes to decide to issue a warning, the time it takes to issue the warning, and the time it takes the public to react to the warning. The benefit of shortening these points of delay are obvious.
3. **Planning can reduce issuance delay.** Examples of the type of planning include pre-identifying the threat conditions requiring warnings, warning triggers, and the public protective actions.
4. **Disseminate alert and warning messages wisely.** There is no single warning mechanism that will reach all people all the time. Consequently, warnings must be disseminated through multiple technologies.
5. **Issue messages that reduce public action delay.** The content of the message is critical in reducing delays by the public in taking protective action. The message must be clear and specific, personalize locations, and be couched in language easily understood by the recipient.

Conclusion

It is important to remember that Sonoma County's notification program was no different from hundreds across the country. Maybe it's time to look at how your system is implemented. I encourage you to read the report, to listen to Dr. Mileti's discussion, and to conduct a program review. 