

Disputed alert system upgraded after NorCal fires

By Carolyn Lochhead and Joaquin Palomino, San Francisco Chronicle

A potentially lifesaving emergency alert system that Sonoma County officials decided against using during the deadly fires that swept through the area last month will finally get a long-planned upgrade, after nearly a yearlong delay by the Trump administration.

All wireless carriers will be required to more specifically target the areas where cell phones would receive 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 all across the county, possibly causing panic and traffic jams that would have blocked people from getting in and out of the area.

They are among a number of local emergency officials who have found fault with the WEA system since it was put in place in 2012, including some who have declined to adopt it at all. Only about a third of all counties in the U.S. have access to the alert system, which is administered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

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