

Public Alert Notification Issue of Friday, June 27, 2014
San Luis Obispo County Office of Emergency Services

Background and Summary Information

The following is intended to provide a brief overview of the siren activation and the cell phone Wireless Emergency Alert message that was sent to cell phones in San Luis Obispo County on Friday, June 27, 2014.

The event began on Friday, June 27, 2014 just before 3:30 p.m. when an Early Warning System siren sounded in error. The siren is part of a system of 131 sirens located in the Diablo Canyon Power Plant Emergency Planning Zone (EPZ). The EPZ is an area that surrounds the Diablo Canyon Power Plant, a nuclear power plant owned and operated by Pacific Gas and Electric Company (PG&E), located on the coast between Avila Beach and Los Osos. The Emergency Planning Zone (EPZ) stretches from the upper Nipomo area (about Willow Road), to the Cayucos area to the north and east to include the San Luis Obispo area. The EPZ is an area in which specific plans are in place – such as evacuation or sheltering-in-place – in the event of an emergency at Diablo Canyon. The sirens are used to alert people in the EPZ to tune to the radio or television to get information about an emergency. Although the sirens are owned and maintained by PG&E as part of the requirements placed on PG&E for the operation of the Diablo Canyon Power Plant, they can be used for many types of emergencies.

In response to the errant siren sounding the San Luis Obispo County Office of Emergency Services (County OES) issued an Emergency Alert System message to quickly notify the public and local news media that the siren sounding was unintentional and that there was no emergency. The Emergency Alert System is used to quickly provide information to radio and TV stations in the event of an emergency or other urgent situation. This is the system often heard being tested on radio stations and seen on TV.

County OES recently began using a new digital Emergency Alert System and even more recently added the ability to send out text-like emergency messages to cell phones using the new Federal Wireless Alert System.

What exactly happened?

PG&E is undertaking an upgrade of the Early Warning System (EWS) sirens. As part of the EWS siren upgrade project, on Friday June 27, 2014 PG&E technicians were conducting tests of a siren near Orcutt Road and Biddle Ranch Road near San Luis Obispo. The test was intended to send signals that would be received by the siren, but not activate the mechanism that produces the sound – this is known as a silent test. While testing was underway the siren did actually activate and sounded in error. The errant sounding of the siren resulted in numerous calls to public safety organizations. Per County OES protocol an Emergency Alert Service (EAS) message was sent out to local radio and television stations advising county residents that a siren had sounded in error and there was no emergency. However, County OES did not intend to send the Wireless Alert Message that was sent to cell phones in the county along with the EAS message.

What was the message(s) I received on my cell phone Friday?

The messages were Wireless Emergency Alerts (WEA) which are emergency text-like messages sent by authorized government authorities through wireless carriers' networks. The messages are sent out by various cell phone carriers through all cell phone towers in a certain area, in our case cell phone towers throughout San Luis Obispo County. The alert includes a unique sound and vibration, and is limited to 90 characters - a limited amount of characters to get out detailed information. That limitation is part of the national system and is not controlled by San Luis Obispo County. For more on WEA please go to the following site on the San Luis Obispo County OES website:

http://www.slocounty.ca.gov/OES/Public_Alert_and_Notification/Wireless_Emergency_Alerts.htm

Why was the initial WEA message sent as it did not provide helpful information?

An initial WEA message was sent erroneously containing only a default message and no specific instructions. The initial WEA message was automatically triggered when the verbal Emergency Alert System message was sent to radio and television stations. Since the WEA system is relatively new and there is no way to test the system without triggering formal activation of the EAS, it was not known that the system default setting would trigger the WEA.

Without an operator entering specific text for the WEA, a default civil emergency message was sent. The first WEA was not intended to be sent to the public and therefore only included the default message which provided information that was not helpful and not intended to go out to the public. Prior to the activation on Friday June 27, WEA has never been used in San Luis Obispo County.

This initial message was followed by a second WEA. The second WEA included information explaining that a siren had failed and there was no emergency or required action on behalf of the public.

What is a Civil Emergency?

Part of the WEA cell phone message noted there was a "Civil emergency". As for the term civil emergency, there are different categories of standardized, nation-wide alert messages that the EAS and WEA systems are programmed to broadcast such as Civil Emergency Message, AMBER Alert, and Monthly Test. These are generally used only for internal use by government agencies, radio and TV broadcasters. In simple terms, a Civil Emergency Message (CEM) is an internal system reference that is used to send EAS information regarding an imminent or in-progress emergency event other than an AMBER Alert or monthly test to radio and TV stations. A Civil Emergency Message (CEM) is used to provide information regarding an imminent or in-progress event that has the potential to pose a significant threat to public safety and/or property. A tsunami warning, or significant hazardous materials spill are examples of potential civil emergencies.

The initial WEA message did not provide enough info, what does “prepare for action” mean?

The initial WEA message was sent erroneously containing only a default message and no specific instructions. It included, in addition to the wording “Civil Emergency” the statement “Prepare for action”. The “Prepare for action” wording was not sent out intentionally but was part of a FEMA scripted default message County OES would not intentionally send out. As the follow up cell phone WEA message that was sent out demonstrated (that message noted there was an accidental siren sounding, there is no emergency) specific information will be sent out to the best of County OES’ ability, keeping in mind there is a 90 character limit for the messages. This is part of the Federal, nationwide system and is not something County OES has the ability to change.

WEA act as a supplement to the Emergency Alert System and are meant to alert the public of a situation in their area that may require them to take action. Due to the limitation on the length of the messages, they are not intended to provide detailed instructions on actions the public should take but instead are intended as an alert that something is happening and to tune to local media for additional information. Specific instructions will be broadcast to the public via EAS messages and news releases.

Why did some people receive a WEA before others and some received no alert at all?

As noted earlier, WEA is a relatively new system and with some exceptions only relatively new cell phones have the capability of receiving the messages.

When a cell phone WEA is sent out by County OES – or any other authorized government agency – the signal actually routes to servers and/or related computer equipment on a Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) system. FEMA then routes the message to cell phone carriers in the affected area, in our case to San Luis Obispo County. Each phone carrier then sends the message out over their individual network. As such, it is possible some messages were sent out at slightly varying times from various cell phone service providers.

For more information specific to cell phones, including a link to your cell phone service provider for WEA information, please see this website: www.ctia.org/WEA.

What is the public supposed to do when a siren goes off and it is an emergency? What was wrong with these information outlets on June 27th?

- Tune to local television or radio stations
 - The EAS messages were relayed to multiple local radio and television stations. By law broadcasters are not required to air any EAS messages that are not a National Level Alert. Because broadcasting local EAS messages is up to the discretion of station management checking multiple channels is recommended.
 - Some radio and local TV stations will broadcast information

- County website
 - Due to maintenance being performed on the county website coupled with a sudden spike of visitors the site went down for approximately ten minutes. County OES is with our IT department so we do not encounter this problem again. We encourage citizens to follow us on

[Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#), which will be updated in the event of an emergency as promptly as possible.

- 211
 - 211 is a non-emergency number that connects individuals and families with information and resources. While information was eventually provided to 211 for public disbursement, the events of June 27, 2014 highlighted the need to improve the processes which County OES supplies information to the 211 call center. We are currently working on implementing the necessary changes.

Please keep in mind that in a fast breaking event, information may not be available instantly. We do want to find out what is going on and to share that information as promptly as possible, but we also want to provide accurate information. If information is not up when you check, please check back again.

What steps are being taken to prevent future inadvertent use of the WEA?

County OES has worked with the vendor for the County Emergency Alert System to reprogram the County's EAS so that WEAs are not automatically sent upon activation of EAS. WEAs are still available for use, but require operator action to enable the WEA and type in a brief emergency specific message.

We apologize for any concern that the WEA message sent on June 27 may have caused.

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