

Automated Phone System Warns San Diego

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By Michael Parrish
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LOS ANGELES, Oct. 23 — With wildfires bearing down on the northern end of San Diego, the authorities used a technology bought two years ago, after California's deadliest outbreak of wildfires, to warn more than a half-million people to evacuate.

The automated phone system, known as a reverse 911 system, sends a recorded message, in this case from the San Diego County Sheriff's Department, to phone numbers en masse, listed and unlisted, in a geographical calling area. If the system gets a busy signal, it can keep ringing until someone, or at least an answering machine, answers.

"It works, and I'm really impressed with it," said Rich Bergman, 65, a retired federal employee who lives in fire-prone Wildcat Canyon, 23 miles east of San Diego, in a telephone interview Tuesday from a restaurant in El Cajon, where he waited to see whether his house had survived. The system, from PlantCML of Temecula, Calif., cost the Sheriff's Department \$300,000 to buy and install, said Lt. Phil Brust.

It is the same system used in the Southern California cities of Long Beach and Santa Barbara, according to the company's marketing director, Kelli Schmith.

Another vendor, Twenty First Century Communications of Columbus, Ohio, has contracts with 137 municipalities, including San Diego County; Santa Clarita, Calif.; and Washington, according to its chief executive, James Kennedy. In Washington, Mr. Kennedy said, the system sent out warnings to 20,000 residents when their water was found to be contaminated.

Mr. Bergman said he received an automated call at 10:10 p.m. Sunday and quickly packed his S.U.V. with valuables. But because there was no wind, and this was his first night in the home he had just finished rebuilding after it was lost in the 2003 Cedar fire, he stayed awake and kept his TV on, evacuating the next morning.

That fire, which burned 311 residences in San Diego County, prompted the county and the Sheriff's Department to buy mass-notification systems and to begin using them in 2005. Since then, they have been used to warn residents to lock their doors when deputies were searching for criminals, but mainly to evacuate people from smaller fires.

By noon on Tuesday, 394,915 calls had been made to San Diego County households, the most extensive use of the system to date, according to a Sheriff's Department spokeswoman. "It has been extremely valuable," said Hanan Harb, the communications coordinator for the Sheriff's Department, who was up all night Monday customizing recorded calls to be sent to individual neighborhoods. A message typically tells people that the caller is the Sheriff's Department, the location of the fire or disturbance, and where the resident or family should go for safety. A contact phone number is included.

As before, the department follows up with bullhorns, helicopter announcements and news media statements. But Lieutenant Brust said he thought the system was “worth every penny.” “And with the mudslides we expect after these fires,” he said, “I’m sure we’ll have more use for it.”