



Alerting Authority Guidance for Issuing Alert Messages

Deciding whether to issue a public alert and warning message can be a difficult decision to make. Ultimately it will be a matter of local judgment; however, you may find it helpful to have an outline of decision criteria to assist you with the process and ensure that a timely decision is made.

Your State, Territorial, Tribal or Local Emergency Alert System (EAS) plan or other emergency plans may provide criteria for issuing public alerts, and if so, should be incorporated into your IPAWS procedures.

Also, when deciding whether to issue a public alert or warning, the following decision criteria could be applied:

1. Does the hazardous situation require the public to take immediate action?
2. Does the hazardous situation pose a serious threat to life and/or property?
3. Is there a high degree of probability the hazard situation will occur?

Components of Effective Warning Messages

Effective warnings are those that result in the public taking recommended actions to protect themselves. To help ensure that warning messages are effective, they must be issued in a timely manner and the following components should be included:

- **Specific Hazard:** What is/are the hazards that are threatening? What are the potential risks for the community?
- **Location:** Where will the impacts occur? Is the location described so those without local knowledge can understand their risk?
- **Timeframes:** When will it arrive at various locations? How long will the impacts last? When should people take action?
- **Source of Warning:** Who is issuing the warning? Is it an official source with public credibility?
- **Magnitude:** A description of the expected impact. How bad is it likely to get?
- **Likelihood:** The probability of occurrence of the impact.
- **Protective Behavior:** What protective actions should people take and when? If evacuation is called for, where should people go and what should they take with them?

Effective Style Guidelines for Warning Messages

How you write an alert/warning message is nearly as important as what you write. Poorly written warnings can undermine both understanding and credibility. Here are some style elements to consider when writing alert and warning messages.

“FEMA’s mission is to support our citizens and first responders to ensure that as a nation we work together to build, sustain, and improve our capability to prepare for, protect against, respond to, recover from, and mitigate all hazards.”

- **Specific:** If the message is not specific enough about the “Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?” the public will spend more time seeking specific information to confirm the risk. Be specific about what is or is not known about the hazard.
- **Consistent:** An alert/warning should be consistent with messages that are distributed via other channels. To the extent possible, alerts/warnings should be consistent from event to event, to the degree that the hazard is similar.
- **Certain:** Use authoritative language and avoid conveying a sense of uncertainty, either in content or in tone. Confine the message to what is known, or if necessary, describe what is unknown in certain terms. Do not guess or speculate.
- **Clear:** Use common words that can easily be understood. Do not use technical terminology or jargon. If protective instructions are precautionary, state so clearly. If the probability of occurrence of the hazard event is less than 100 percent, try to convey in simple terms what the likelihood is of it occurring.
- **Accurate:** Do not overstate or understate the facts. Do not omit important information. Convey respect for the intelligence and judgment of your public.

Criteria for Appropriately Issuing Alert Messages

The following factors should be considered in the selection of appropriate event codes:

- **Hazardous Weather and Coastal Events:** Event codes relating to hazardous weather and coastal events are reserved for the National Weather Service.
- **State/Local Emergency Plans:** State or local EAS plans may limit the type of codes which EAS participants such as broadcasters are assigned to monitor EAS broadcasts.
- **Relevant Hazards:** Certain types of hazards may not be relevant to the risks in your area. For example, volcanoes or avalanches may not be present in your part of the country.
- **Event Codes Specified in Your Application and Implemented in the Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS):** The event codes that are specified in your application and implemented in IPAWS will determine which types of alerts your Collaborative Operating Group (GOG) is permitted to relay to alert dissemination services.
- **Local Knowledge:** Finally, the selection of an event code may determine what is displayed in a television message “crawl” and your selection of an event code may depend on what members of your community will understand based on local practice.

Accessible Alert and Warning Messages for Persons with Access and Functional Needs

As the message originator, you should keep in mind the needs of persons with disabilities and others with access and functional needs.

- **Clear and Simple Language:** A general guideline to follow is to use clear and simple language whenever possible, with minimal use of abbreviations. The most important information should be presented first.
- **Text-to-Speech Conversion:** Care must be taken when composing text that is converted to audio by text-to-speech equipment.

- **Consistent Audio:** IPAWS and the Common Alerting Protocol (CAP) can accommodate pre-recorded audio files that may be used by EAS participants such as broadcasters and that assist the blind or those with limited vision. The audio should be consistent as possible with the text and should ensure that any abbreviations are explained.
- **Ample Text and Audio to Explain Images/Maps:** Because IPAWS-OPEN provides the capability to deliver multimedia messages, ample text and audio should be provided to explain images or maps, so that message recipients can understand the meaning of what is being conveyed graphically.
- **Screen Reading and Text-to-Speech Devices:** Some mobile devices and currently software provide screen reading and text-to-speech conversion capabilities for alerts delivered via Internet technologies. When considering these and other translation technologies, craft messages that avoid non-standard language formats and terminology.

Accessible Alert and Warning Messages for persons With English as a Second Language

Non-English-speaking persons may not understand warnings that are provided in English. Communities with high percentages of non-English-speaking people may consider issuing warnings in multiple languages, as well as English.

IPAWS does not provide translation services, but it is capable of accepting and relaying alerts in multiple languages as composed by the alert originator.

Alert authoring or other software programs may provide automated translation, but alerting authorities should validate any automatically translated text with a fluent speaker of the language to avoid errors. The use of pre-translated templates may serve to minimize the amount of information requiring translation for actual alerts.

For more information on event codes, warnings and emergencies, go to: www.fema.gov/ipaws or <http://www.fema.gov/informational-materials> and click on the IPAWS Toolkit for Alerting Authorities.