

HENNEPIN COUNTY

OUTDOOR WARNING CAPABILITIES

Hennepin County Emergency Management
1600 Prairie Drive, Medina, MN 55340
612 596-0250

Eric Waage, Director
June 15th 2012

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Purpose of Outdoor Warning Sirens

Outdoor Warning Sirens exist to alert people who are outdoors that an emergency situation is imminent or in progress.

Outdoor Warning Sirens are one element of a more comprehensive alert and warning system that warns people in many different situations. Indoors, at home or work, people should obtain a *NOAA Weather Radio* to monitor National Weather Service (NWS) signals and be provided continuous indoor alert services. The *Emergency Alert System* is used to warn people engaged in listening or watching broadcast media. A new NWS program called *Wireless Emergency Alerts* sends warnings to mobile devices. No single element of this system is capable of reaching all people at all times. These elements work together as an overlapping alert and warning system.

Actions to take when Outdoor Warning Sirens are heard:

1. Get inside. Take immediate action to find shelter inside. Small, interior rooms, away from windows on the lowest level are best. Have items available to use for personal protection, such as sturdy furniture, cushions and helmets.
2. Get information. Find a source of official information to know what type of emergency is happening and what to do next. Broadcast media are critical to get quick and accurate information at this time. Have a battery powered radio, television or other mobile device capable of getting news.

Reasons for Outdoor Warning Siren activation:

Natural Hazard – Severe Weather

- Tornado Warning. *Tornado Warnings* are issued by the NWS based on trained spotter reports and specific radar indications. A *Tornado Warning* means that a tornado has been spotted or is imminent. Sirens are sounded immediately when the NWS issues a *Tornado Warning*.
- Winds at or above 70 miles per hour. Measured or NWS forecast wind speeds at or above 70 MPH will trigger siren activation.

Please understand the following regarding severe weather...

- Winds at or above 70 MPH will cause the NWS to issue a *Severe Thunderstorm Warning*, however the NWS criteria for a *Severe Thunderstorm Warning* starts at lower wind speeds of 58 MPH. Forecast hail of 1 inch diameter or larger also results in a *Severe Thunderstorm Warning*. Hennepin County does not sound sirens for hail or winds below 70 MPH, therefore sirens are not sounded for all *Severe Thunderstorm Warnings*.
- Why was 70 MPH selected by Hennepin County? Collective experience in the weather and emergency management communities suggests that 70 MPH is the speed where winds start to present a serious threat to life safety. At about this speed, some large healthy trees will start to fall, structures begin to pull apart and flying debris can become deadly missiles.
- Why are NWS *Severe Thunderstorm Warnings* tied to lower winds at 58 MPH and hail? This is because *Severe Thunderstorm Warnings* are meant to both address life safety and property damage. In general, property damage starts to rapidly increase around 58 MPH. The term damaging winds describes the potential for winds to impact property, especially at wind-sensitive places like airports, agricultural locations, and construction sites.
- Sirens are not sounded in Hennepin County for hail, lightning, floods or any of the other normal hazards associated with severe weather.

Industrial Accident – Toxic Release

- *Outdoor Warning Sirens* may be used during industrial accidents, particularly those involving a major release or spill of hazardous materials. Such use is rare.
- Use the standard *Outdoor Warning Siren* action steps including: 1) Get inside, and 2) Get information from official sources and broadcast media. Further information will include instructions to either shelter in place or evacuate.
- All metro residents should understand that the areas immediately surrounding our state's two nuclear power generating plants (Monticello and Prairie Island) have *Outdoor Warning Sirens* to warn the public of a release. The sirens will sound a steady tone lasting 3 minutes in case of emergency. When hearing these sirens, 1) Get inside, and 2) Get information on further actions. Nuclear plant warning sirens are not in Hennepin County. Contact local emergency management near the plants or the plant operator for more details.

National Security – Attack

- The original intent of *Outdoor Warning Sirens* was to warn of incoming enemy attacks. The sirens are still ready to perform this national defense function.
- The ATTACK WARNING tone used by *Outdoor Warning Sirens* is unique – only used for attack situations. It is a wavering (rising and falling) tone.
- If an ATTACK WARNING is heard, the immediate action steps remain the same, 1) Get inside and 2) Get information on the nature of the attack and the next steps to take.

What will sirens sound like?

- An ALERT SIGNAL is used for all Severe Weather and Industrial Accidents. The ALERT SIGNAL is a five minute steady tone. Five minutes will allow you enough time to 1) Get inside, and 2) Get information.

- An ATTACK WARNING is used for situations where an enemy attack is imminent or in progress. The ATTACK WARNING is a five minute wavering (rising and falling) tone.
- *Outdoor Warning Sirens* **DO NOT** sound an all clear tone. Sirens will not tell you when the situation is 'clear.' People must use official sources and broadcast media reports to determine when it is safe to come out.

Coordinated Regional Siren Activation Standards:

- Most Twin Cities Metropolitan Area counties (including Hennepin County) have decided to adopt a single severe weather standard for *Outdoor Warning Siren* activation. A regional standard reduces confusion about sirens as people travel between counties to work, live, shop or for recreation. The regional *Outdoor Warning Siren* standard activates sirens for 1) an NWS-issued Tornado Warning and 2) activation for actual or forecast 70 MPH winds.
- Metro Counties adopting the regional siren standard include Carver, Chisago, Hennepin, Ramsey, Scott, Sherburne, and Washington.