



POLK COUNTY EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY

POLK COUNTY ADMINISTRATION BUILDING
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A.J. MUMM, DIRECTOR

Beginning in 2009, Polk County Emergency Management began looking at changing their policy for the activation of outdoor warning sirens for severe weather events. Research by the Storm Prediction Center indicates that EF0 tornadoes, which are the most common tornado occurring 53.5% of the time, peak wind speeds of 65-85mph. These wind speeds have been known to peel the surface off some roofs, break branches from trees, damage gutters and siding, push over shallow-rooted trees and turn unsecured lawn furniture and other items into dangerous projectiles. Far from an over-dramatization of the threat, the potential for serious injury to unsheltered persons from 70mph winds are comparable to that of an EF0 tornado.

Historical research of weather records from the National Climatic Data Center dating back to 1987 indicate that on average, the sirens would be activated one additional time per year for severe thunderstorms with winds at or exceeding 70mph. This research alleviated the concern that we would be desensitizing the public by overuse of the sirens.

We here at Polk County Emergency Management believe it is our job to ensure the safety of every citizen and visitor to the county. In consultation with the National Weather Service, it was decided that the policy for the activation of outdoor warning sirens be expanded to include events where forecasted or actual wind speeds reach or exceed 70mph (61kts). This change in policy did not require the expenditure of any additional funds to complete.

This proposed change to the outdoor warning siren policy was taken before the Emergency Management Commission in February 2010. The Emergency Management Commission includes a representative from each jurisdiction in Polk County. Following a careful review of the policy, it was adopted by the commission with a vote of 11-1.

To coincide with Severe Weather Awareness Week starting April 5th, Polk County Emergency Management conducted a press release to all media outlets in the county to educate the public about the change in time for the upcoming storm season. Some of those stories can still be found archived on the internet. Individual cities posted the changes to their respective websites and included details about the change in both municipal mailings and in local newspapers.

Confusion following the siren activation for forecasted high winds on June 18th requires a re-education of the public on the sirens. Outdoor warning sirens are crude devices in and of themselves. The sirens only produce one tone, indicating that conditions are such that you should seek additional information to ensure your safety. They are designed to work in concert with other more sophisticated systems such as television, radio, internet and NOAA weather alert radios to provide complete information about the threat. It is then the responsibility of individuals to take action based on that threat.

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Outdoor warning sirens are used for just that: outdoor warning. They are not designed to be heard inside structures and are instead to warn persons outside who do not have access to electronic devices for receiving alerts. Persons inside should monitor any and all sources of information including, but not limited to television, radio, internet, and NOAA weather alert radios for weather warnings. Radios and NOAA weather alert radios can be battery-operated and will function when the power is out. NOAA weather alert radios can also be set to alert you during the night when you are sleeping.

The intent of the sirens is to provide ample warning for persons to seek shelter and additional information before the storm hits. Because of this, sirens may sound before hazardous conditions exist. Due to the nature of severe weather, hazardous conditions may also develop before an activation of the sirens is possible. Outdoor warning sirens should not be your sole source of warning.

Outdoor weather sirens do not transmit an "all clear". Instead, the sirens will sound in a cycle of 3-5 minutes, followed by a 10-15 minute break for the duration of the threat (warning period). Residents need to monitor the previously mentioned sources for information regarding when the threat has diminished.

On a final note, we ask that residents refrain from calling 9-1-1 to question the activation or non-activation of the outdoor warning sirens. This places an undue burden on the 9-1-1 system and prevents true emergency calls from getting through.

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