

Testimony of Anthony Gossner

Fire Chief

City of Santa Rosa, CA

Before the

Committee on Energy and Commerce

Subcommittee on Communications and Technology

United States House of Representatives

on February 27, 2020

Good morning Chairman Doyle and Ranking Member Latta, and members of the subcommittee.

My name is Anthony Gossner, and I am the Fire Chief for the City of Santa Rosa, CA.

On behalf of Mayor Schwedhelm, Vice Mayor Fleming and the entire City of Santa Rosa, I would like to express my appreciation for the opportunity to appear before this Subcommittee today to discuss the vital role wireless communications and technology play in public safety and emergency situations.

A little over two years ago, the City of Santa Rosa – the largest city in Sonoma County and the County seat – experienced, what was then, the worst wildfire in California’s history. Beginning the night of October 8, 2017, multiple fires broke out throughout California’s North Bay Area. In Sonoma County, what were initially five major fires merged into three – the Tubbs, Nuns, and Pocket fires known collectively as the Sonoma Complex Fires. In the span of a few hours, life

profoundly changed for tens of thousands of people in Santa Rosa and throughout Sonoma County.

A total of 24 people lost their lives to the fires in Sonoma County, an estimated 100,000 people evacuated from their homes, and 43 emergency shelters opened – serving up to 4,162 people at the peak of operations in Sonoma County.

Property losses were estimated at \$13 billion. More than 3,000 homes, approximately five percent of the City of Santa Rosa's housing stock, were destroyed, compounding an already severe housing deficit in the County. And for many fire survivors in our community, after losing their homes and personal possessions, lost their ability to communicate with family members, friends, doctors, and others because they lost their landline and associated phone numbers.

We thank Congressman Thompson for introducing the PHONE ACT, which will provide a temporary hold on telephone number reassignment after a federally declared major disaster and ensure that as disaster survivors go through the long and painful process of rebuilding, they will, have one less thing to worry about. The City of Santa Rosa strongly supports the PHONE Act and respectfully requests that this Committee pass it quickly, making this critical need available to our communities this fire season and before another natural disaster strikes.

We know that telecommunications infrastructure is not only vital for our residents during and after recovery, but it is also critical for how public safety officials respond to wildfires, hurricanes, tornados, and so many other natural disasters.

The California Governor's Office of Emergency Services reported that 341 cell sites were offline during the October 2017 Northern California Wildfires and a combined 489 cell sites were offline during the Camp and Woolsey fires in November 2018. This prevented wireless users in the impacted areas from being able to call 9-1-1, receive an emergency alert, or use their cell phones to find the safest evacuation route. Prior to and during the 2019 Kincade Fire in Sonoma County, PG&E de-energized major portions of Northern California. In Sonoma County, one-quarter of the area's 436 cellphone towers were not functioning and in nearby Marin County, more than half of the area's 280 towers were out of service due to PG&E's PSPS strategy.

While wireless infrastructure cannot stop a wildfire, it can and should be hardened to withstand the impacts of these and similar disasters. Therefore, the City strongly supports the Wireless Infrastructure Resiliency during Emergencies and Disasters Act, the WIRED ACT, sponsored by Congresswoman Eshoo. The bill gives states the flexibility and authority to require wireless companies to deploy hardened infrastructure so that wireless networks are more resilient to disasters. During the Tubbs fire, roughly 70 cell towers were knocked out of service within the first several hours of the fire due to fire damage, loss of power, and loss of terrestrial communications.

Based on our experience, mandating reasonable requirements like: installation of more fail-safe battery backups at cell towers; increasing the number of sites with backup generators and sufficient fuel to operate for a minimum of 72 hours; requirements for reciprocity between cell

providers so that, in the event of cell sites going offline during a disaster, the sharing of cellular networks will hopefully be able to maintain at least a minimal level of emergency messaging support; retrofitting existing cell tower sites; and enhanced vegetation management and defensible space standards near cell towers could significantly improve our response capabilities.

In addition to hardening our telecommunications infrastructure, our alerting system plays a significant role in protecting people. Even as our recovery is still ongoing, the City has taken critical steps, including commissioning an After-Action report¹, to identify problems and implement solutions that will make the City more resilient to future disasters. Our plan incorporates mitigation principals into future infrastructure projects and improves the alerting systems available for public notifications, alerts, warnings, and advisories. The alerting systems now available to the City include:

- **IPAWS:** Most critically, City of Santa Rosa Public Safety and Emergency Management staff now have the access, training, and ability to send Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS) alerts. IPAWS provides public safety officials an effective way to alert and warn the public about serious emergencies using the Emergency Alert System (EAS), Wireless Emergency Alerts (WEA), the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Weather Radio, and other public alerting systems—all from a single interface.
- **SoCo Alert** – An **opt-in** alerting system used for all emergency notifications and advisements with delivery by phone, text, and email.

¹ [Coming Together in Crisis](#), City of Santa Rosa April 2019

- **Hi/Lo Sirens** – Santa Rosa police cars and fire department vehicles are now outfitted with Hi/Lo sirens, a different sound than traditional sirens, that is only used to alert residents of the need to evacuate.
- **Nixle** – An **opt-in** community information service delivering text and email messages.
- **Alerting system outreach campaigns** – Robust outreach campaigns and materials detailing the different alerting systems have been produced and disseminated throughout the City.

In the event of evacuation warnings or orders, all systems—EAS, WEA, SoCoAlert, Hi/Lo Sirens and Nixle — will be used. The public and City personnel are being highly encouraged to sign up for both opt-in systems – SoCo Alert and Nixle.

The City would also like to acknowledge the work FEMA is doing to update IPAWS to implement enhancements to the WEA system and has been working closely with the City of Santa Rosa and other local governments to deploy the next generation of WEA technology, which will: increase the maximum character count from 90 to 360; add support for Spanish-language WEA; add two new alert categories in addition to Presidential, AMBER and Imminent Threat; enhance geo-targeting reaching 100 percent of the targeted area with no more than 1/10th of a mile overshoot and other improvements.

While the update to IPAWS, which requires updates to wireless providers' nationwide networks and customer phones, is critical to enhancing our alerting capabilities and response, we also need better coordination and information sharing prior to and during disasters.

During the Tubbs fire and during most recent Kincadee fire, the City did not have access to maps or information identifying where all carrier cell towers are located. Targeting a WEA without knowing where the towers of cell providers are located leads to concerns with geofencing, a disaster mitigation technique that uses a virtual fence to communicate with the public. Knowing where towers and cell sites are located is critical to when localities must draw geo-targeted messaging perimeters during an emergency. Making this information available to local governments will dramatically help to ensure WEAs have a better chance of being received by the population in danger.

This is why we support the RESLIENT Networks Act, introduced by Chairman Pallone and Rep. McNerney, which will ensure that communities and providers of critical communications are coordinating prior to disasters and sharing information like network outage data. This collaboration will help first responders target our response more effectively and quickly.

The City of Santa Rosa is working closely with the whole community including government, nonprofit, and private sector partners to ensure that our residents, our first responders and emergency managers have the proper planning, equipment, and personnel in place to prevent and respond to the next disaster. In order to be successful, communities must continue to

improve their pre-disaster coordination at the federal, State and local levels, and this must include our telecommunication partners.

Again, thank you for providing me the opportunity to testify today and I look forward to answering your questions.