Broadband Alliance documents impacts of recent cell and internet outages

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The Broadband Alliance of Mendocino County has discussed early results of their ongoing communications survey following the Mendocino Lake Complex fire. At its public outreach meeting in Ukiah Friday, the members recapped communication issues local agencies dealt with during the fire emergency and reviewed other broadband provider updates and summarized the implications of recent legislation.

Broadband Alliance Chairwoman Trish Steel gave Alliance members updates on the online survey, designed to assess and document the scope of the telecommunications outages which affected Mendocino, Sonoma and Napa counties during the fires, both within and outside of the burn areas.

According to Steel, the data collected will form the basis for a comprehensive outage report which she said will provide a "big picture" perspective of the state of services and help pinpoint weaknesses in infrastructure and how the power outages affected devices dependent on telecommunications, in addition to documenting the impacts on real people and businesses/organizations affected.

"It's a lot of work, but I feel it's really important," Steel said, adding that people tend to forget how widespread an outage is following emergencies. Part of the goal of the survey is to provide documentation in the organization's ongoing efforts to require reliable, diverse and redundant services.

Once completed, Steel said the report will be submitted to the Federal Communications Commission, the California Public Utilities Commission, and elected officials who can use the data to shape communications legislation.

Similar reports were prepared in 2014 and 2015 after a single point of failure caused countywide outages. During her report to Alliance members, Steel said she heard informally that top AT&T people were getting calls asking what was going on in Mendocino County after the 2014 report went to the Department of Homeland Security.

As of Monday, Steel reports 350 responses to the 40-question survey, from Mendocino. She said her goal was to have every single zip code affected by the recent outages to respond. The Alliance has not had responses from 22 zip codes, some from areas in Mendocino County such as Leggett, Casper, Piercy and Boonville.

"My goal is to get 1,000 responses from Mendocino County," Steel said.

Calvin Sandeen, an intern from the Sonoma Economic Development Board who has been working with Access Sonoma said there has been a huge response to the survey from Santa Rosa but initially they have received very little participation from other cities.

Sandeen said most of the responses covered the same topics, mainly the need for improved communications.

Alliance members and representatives said they heard the same concerns from residents affected by outages in the various counties, including a need for safer utilities, overall improvements in their telecommunications services. Residents are said to have expressed concern over allowing large swaths of their counties to have only one functional cell phone and satellite service provider.

Kathy Wylie, Community Foundation of Mendocino County board member suggested the Alliance take the survey to the Mendocino Superintendent's Council and ask them to promote the survey through the school districts.

Mike Nicholls, co-chair of Access Sonoma Broadband said he is working with contractor Magellan on an updated broadband plan for the county and Steel recently joined their advisory board.

The Alliance facilitated a countywide planning program that produced a working draft of a broadband plan for Mendocino County in 2012.

Karen Horner, library director for Mendocino County provided a report on how the library in Willits served as an important source of communications during the crisis.

She said 700 people gathered at the library during the first two days of the Mendocino Lake Complex Fire when Willits was greatly impacted and every form of communication, except radio, was shut down.

"It was a huge eye opener for us," she said, adding since the library system goes through the county and the internal system is on the cloud, Ukiah, Round Valley, and Willits were all operational.

Horner reported 250 people logged in at the library on Monday, Oct. 9 and by 8 p.m. more than 500 people were accessing the library's wi-fi.

Legislation updates

The Internet for All Act, AB 1665 (Chiu, Eggman, Mullin) passed the Assembly floor this fall with 68 yes and 8 no votes.

Steel previously said from the Alliance's perspective, there were too many "give-aways" to the large communications carriers and barriers for smaller independent service providers.

Alliance members also received updates on SB 1988, (R-Wicker), a bill designed to streamline broadband infrastructure permitting on established public right-of-ways, and for other purposes.

As of Oct. 19, the act has been read twice and referred to the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works.

Another bill, HR 2903 (R-McKinley) directs the FCC to develop regulations that would establish a nationwide standard for gauging if mobile data services and broadband services in rural areas are reasonably comparable to services provided in urban areas. The bill has been referred to the Subcommittee on Communications and Technology.