



# **McChrystal After-Action Report: Alerts, Warnings and Evacuations**

## **Summary of Eaton Fire Actions**

*The following account of the Eaton Fire is from McChrystal Group's "After-Action Review of Alert Notification Systems and Evacuation Policies for the Eaton and Palisades Fires." All text is verbatim, with minor edits for clarity and key points in boldface type. For a timeline overview of the Eaton Fire, [click here](#).*

### **Unprecedented Incident Winds**

- The most critical factor influencing the spread and size of the Eaton and Palisades Fires was the unprecedented strength of the Santa Ana winds.
- High wind speeds prevented the use of fixed-wing aircraft to assess the fire situation or to make water or retardant drops to fight the [Eaton] fire. **All aerial aircraft, including helicopters, were only able to operate for the first 30 minutes after their initial mobilization before being grounded at 6:45 p.m. due to the dangerous wind conditions. This significantly decreased the first responders' ability to maintain real-time situational awareness on the fire's movement and behavior.**

### **Fire Behavior**

- The Eaton Fire initially spread east; however, in the early morning hours of January 8, an increase in wind speed and changes in wind direction caused the fire to aggressively spread to the west.
- In the Altadena area specifically, the intensity of the wind increased notably [90 mph in the Eaton Fire area and 65 mph in Altadena] in the hours after ignition and was accompanied by highly variable wind directions.
- The sudden shift in the direction of the Eaton Fire and an increase in the wind's intensity at around 3:00 a.m. on January 8 prompted an urgent need to assess and coordinate priorities among the various responding agencies.
- The Eaton Fire moved quickly with homes burning as a result of the main body of the fire spreading or the wind-driven ember casts intensifying due to increasing wind speeds.
- The pace and intensity of the fire's movement in a more densely populated area west of Lake Avenue exceeded what first responders had observed during earlier stages of the Eaton Fire.
- **All first responders who had worked on other wildfires and were interviewed as part of this review said they had never seen anything like the Eaton Fire.**

### **Alerts and Warnings**

- OEM sent an advisory alert to the 12 evacuation zones (areas of Pasadena/Eaton Canyon, North of I-210, South of Eaton Canyon, Altadena East of Lake Ave) at potential risk of the Eaton Fire at approximately 6:48 p.m. on January 7, at the direction of

Incident Command. The alert advised the public to “BE ALERT AND MONITOR.” At 7:26 p.m. on January 7, Incident Command directed OEM to send the first Eaton Fire evacuation orders for the seven [additional] evacuation zones [shown in the table on Page 26 of the report.]

- Additional evacuation warnings and orders were sent throughout the night as the Eaton Fire continued to spread. By 9:00 p.m., evacuation orders and warnings were expanded to include 11 more zones, followed by 16 more by 10:30 p.m.
- Although there were reports of fire west of Lake Avenue as early as 10:50 p.m. on January 7, the data shows that none of the locations cited in those 911 calls are listed in the [CAL FIRE Damage Inspection (DINS) ] reports. **The first validated instance of a structure on fire west of Lake Avenue 598 (as identified in the DINS report) was at 500 E Las Flores Drive at 12:55 a.m. on January 8.**
- During the interview process, LACoFD staff in the field in Altadena recall suggesting to Unified Command LACoFD staff a little before 12:00 a.m. on January 8 that due to high winds, evacuation orders should go out for the foothills of Altadena, all the way to La Canada. Unified Command staff did not recall this occurring and reported that the fire front for the Eaton Fire was not moving west into those areas at that time.
- **Unified Command was dealing with a multitude of issues caused by the catastrophic wind-driven fire and the concerns raised regarding the Eaton Fire reaching the [Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) ] during the same time frame and having potentially catastrophic impacts across the San Gabriel Valley. Alerts were not sent out to this area until later in the early morning of January 8 [3:25 a.m.], but they were sent before the fire front crossed west of Lake Avenue [after 5 a.m.]**
- At approximately 2:18 a.m., LACoFD field personnel reported over the radio that they had eyes on the fire in the foothills north of Farnsworth Park above Lake Avenue and that the fire front appeared to be moving west along the foothills. The same LACoFD field personnel said they were going to the [Incident Command Post (ICP)] to share more details on their observations. While ICP staff were unable to confirm that LACoFD staff arrived at the ICP, LACoFD Incident Command staff heard the 2:18 a.m. radio traffic indicating that the fire was moving west and started evaluating more areas for evacuations, including those west of Lake Avenue. **With this new information from the field, additional evacuation orders and evacuation warnings were sent out to address the new threat trajectory.**
- **Between 1:12 a.m. and 3:00 a.m. on the morning of January 8, OEM did not receive direction from LACoFD or LASD to send any evacuation warnings or evacuation orders for the Eaton Fire, as all areas LACoFD believed were directly impacted by or at risk from the Eaton Fire had already received an evacuation warning or order.**
- OEM was again directed to send evacuation messages with both evacuation orders and warnings by Incident Command at approximately 3:00 a.m. The evacuation orders and warnings were relayed to OEM staff in the [Emergency Operations Center (EOC) ], who then sent out the evacuation messages at 3:25 a.m. for the Eaton Fire, with the initial alert covering areas west of Lake Avenue.

- **Satellite imagery from FireGuard, a National Guard satellite program, appears to show that the fire front itself did not cross Lake Avenue into west Altadena until after 5:00 a.m. on January 8 but that spot fires impacted west Altadena in the early morning.**

OEM was directed by Incident Command to send the final evacuation warnings of the Eaton Fire's first 24 hours for Scholl Canyon on January 8 at 8:22 a.m., and the only other evacuation orders issued after that were those for Mt. Wilson at 11:57 a.m. on January 9.

## Evacuations

- Once the Eaton Fire started, LASD's Altadena and Crescenta Valley Sheriff staff began evacuations in the neighborhoods initially impacted, and as more resources were deployed to the area, they continued evacuations throughout the night and early morning hours.
- On January 7, before the Eaton Fire started, LASD staff and patrol cars were sent to assist in the Palisades Fire, but they subsequently returned to Altadena to assist with evacuations. Additional personnel and mobile field forces from nearby Sheriff Stations (Crescenta Valley, Industry, San Dimas, and Pico Rivera) and Twin Towers Correctional Facility were also deployed to the area to assist, along with LASD search and rescue (SAR) teams.
- **Despite utilizing additional personnel, a shortage of LASD duty vehicles hindered comprehensive coverage across all impacted neighborhoods.** Vulnerable populations, especially older residents who were not monitoring alerts due to a digital divide and possible mobility challenges, faced increased risks of delayed evacuation
- **The LASD and LACoFD were also involved in evacuating residents from several senior care facilities, including the Pasadena Park Healthcare and Wellness Center within the first hour of the fire and the MonteCedro Senior Care Community in Altadena from approximately 4:00 a.m. on January 8. LASD staff worked to mobilize Pasadena transit buses to these facilities, with some LASD staff leading bus drivers into and through the impacted fire areas. The use of these buses allowed the quick evacuation of many vulnerable residents.**
- Given the catastrophic nature of the Eaton Fire and the demand for resources to assist with evacuations, both LASD and LACoFD command level personnel in the field either conducted individual evacuations or ordered evacuations directly in neighborhoods. This heroic response was driven by urgency and their commitment to save lives, but it also added additional complexity to their responsibilities as they worked to maintain broader operational oversight in the field.
- For both fires, some LASD and LACoFD personnel conducting evacuations and rescues of residents where fires were already burning homes performed heroic actions. In some areas, they worked with limited to no visibility due to thick smoke or with downed trees and power lines blocking road access.

## Other Factors and Findings

- The Eaton Fire...occurred in the evening, in darkness and intense smoke, as Southern California Edison (SCE) public safety shutoffs ensued and the fire impacted power lines in the Altadena and Pasadena areas, which took out streetlights and ambient lighting in homes in some of the areas.
- The Eaton Fire eventually spread into the western and southern portions of Altadena and Pasadena, and concerns were raised that the Eaton Fire would threaten the Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) near La Cañada Flintridge. These concerns centered around the significant robotic space exploration work at the facility, along with the elevated level of risk of materials such as lithium-ion batteries causing toxic fumes if ignited.
- Images from 5:00 a.m. ... show that the Eaton Fire threatened the Altadena Sheriff's Station (approximately 250 feet west of Lake Avenue, at 780 E. Altadena Drive) The staff at the station had to evacuate and LASD staff went to the station to help remove items from the armory and secure the weapons.
- In the Altadena area of SD5, which was impacted by the Eaton Fire, it had been a very long time since a fire prompted an evacuation. Areas west of Eaton Canyon had not burned since the 1930s and areas east had likely not been evacuated since the Kinneloa Mesa Fire in 1993. Prior to the Eaton Fire, Altadena was not classified as a high-hazard area for wildfires in CAL FIRE's FHSZ maps.
- During the Eaton Fire, information being shared on social media exacerbated compliance issues. **A trending phrase, "The fire is moving east," fostered some complacency and reluctance in residents in Altadena and those west of Lake Avenue to evacuate and remain vigilant of potential risks.**
- In certain areas, for both fires, some homeowners believed their properties were safe or had confidence in extinguishing flames with garden hoses, while others, particularly those in generational homes, resisted evacuation due to emotional ties.