

Public Safety Power Shutoff

RDPO LESSONS LEARNED

SEPTEMBER 2022



RDPO
REGIONAL DISASTER
PREPAREDNESS ORGANIZATION

OVERVIEW

This document summarizes RDPO lessons learned during the PGE Public Safety Power Shutoffs (PSPS) that occurred in the Portland Metro Region in September 2022. It focuses on timing, content, and accessibility of emergency alerts and other communication with the public. Observations and suggestions were compiled by RDPO staff during meetings with stakeholders and a [community survey](#) (see summary at the end of this document). The Oregon Public Utility Commission (OPUC) also collected statewide PSPS feedback (see [OPUC survey summary](#)).

OBSERVATIONS & SUGGESTIONS

GENERAL

1. RDPO member partners expressed questions and concerns about [PSPS Statutes](#) and administrative rules related to public communication. There are many forms of public communication involved in the PSPS process, which complicates the clarity of roles and authorities. Before, during, and after this event, it was unclear who had ultimate authority regarding the timing and content of public communication.
 - Oregon [statutes and rules](#) should be reviewed. Authorities should be clarified among RDPO members and utility providers.

EMERGENCY ALERTING

1. PSPS planning and exercising focused on scenarios with only one or two impacted PSPS zones. This incident impacted all RDPO counties with PGE PSPS zones, so it was geographically widespread. This resulted in last-minute decision making and using simple solutions for complex challenges impacting many agencies and communities.
 - Future planning and exercises between RDPO members and utility providers should reflect more variable and complex scenarios.
2. There was concern that multiple counties sending alerts would cause a significant amount of “overspray” resulting in unnecessary confusion for the public. Multiple equity-centered arguments were made for a regional WEA. Because we hadn’t planned for a scenario in which all zones were impacted, there was a lack of agreement regarding what action to take.
 - RDPO members should coordinate a discussion about the merits of regional alerting in certain scenarios, ensuring county Emergency Management Directors are present. Strive to achieve written agreements.
 - RDPO members should discuss and exercise cross-jurisdictional alerting and regional alerting capabilities.

3. 911 and 211 were not represented on the planning call the day before the PSPS began.
 - RDPO members should consider including 911 and 211 in all coordination calls so they can prepare for increased call volume, staffing, and are provided with talking points.

4. Because the existing voice and text template messages said that de-energization would occur in 1-4 hours, PGE planned to send imminent PSPS alerts in the middle of the night. The template messages were created to comply with the statute that said to the extent possible, alerts should be sent 1-4 hours in advance of anticipated de-energization. County emergency managers advocated not to send alerts during the night. Nighttime alerting can create unnecessary fear and panic and provides limited opportunity to prepare. Decisions about timing churned over the course of the event, creating confusion and frustration.
 - State, regional, and local authorities need to clarify roles for complex PSPS events.
 - State and local alerting authorities need to set specific criteria for sending alerts during the night. Community input on timing of alerts from the RDPO Accessible Alert & Warning Workshops should be considered.

5. Templates for PSPS were pre-scripted but did not match the timing of the incident. It took several hours for PGE to modify the content and when it was delivered to local authorities at 8pm, the translation was incorrect. PGE expressed a desire to review and approve messages before sending. Some counties sent the translated templates as previously written. Some made edits themselves. As the event continued, the counties sent their WEAs without final PGE approval so they could provide people advance notice at a reasonable hour. But the question kept coming up - assuming the information is accurate, who has the final say on content?
 - As noted above, clarify authorities.
 - State and local authorities should consider creating versions of pre-scripted templates to account for various scenarios.
 - State and local authorities should consider more robust plans for alerting in different scenarios and exercise those plans.

6. Alert technical experts were needed for long shifts, and many jurisdictions do not have enough technical experts available for long-duration alerting. Alerting staff were taxed during the response.
 - The RDPO Emergency Alert & Warning (EAW) Work Group suggested adding additional alerting capabilities using RDPO personnel with training and credentials.

7. Use of the Emergency Alert System (EAS) was considered to support the potential regional alert. However, currently only Clark, Clackamas, and the State of Oregon are capable of sending EAS alerts for the RDPO area. Clark wasn't included in regional conversations when EAS was being considered for this incident.
 - Local alerting authorities should increase EAS capability within RDPO.
 - Local alerting authorities should include EAS consideration in PSPS planning.

- Local and regional authorities should create alerting best practices and protocols that cover EAS coordination. When regional alerting is being discussed, ensure representatives from all RDPO counties are present.
8. Communities in PSPS zones expressed fear and frustration. When the power was cut, they lost access to cell towers and internet (including fiber landline service). Their only source of updates during the outage was word-of-mouth, traveling a long distance to an area with cell service, or radio, but there were no radio or other alternative communication methods being used. Cell phones in PSPS zones received WEA alerts only once power was restored.
- Local, regional and state authorities should explore alternatives for communicating when power, internet, cell services, and landline services are unavailable. See EAS notes above.
 - Local, regional and state authorities should provide information about why internet-based landlines aren't useful during power outages. Provide ways for community members and local authorities to advocate for improved cell service.
 - Local and regional authorities should coordinate a discussion with the State and PUC to address local impacts to communication infrastructure in a de-energized PSPS zone.
9. Communities throughout the region expressed confusion and frustration. 911 centers and social media heard from people who were scared or upset. Some people were angry because they thought the government was shutting off power. Some people received WEAs with no specific location information or a link for additional information.
- Local and regional alerting authorities should always craft WEAs with sensitivity to jurisdictional overspray.
 - Alert messages should always provide links to more information and have functional, accessible maps available on those landing pages.
 - The RDPO Disaster Messaging Work Group (DMWG) and EAW Work Group should continue to explore ways to display active alerts on a single map on PublicAlerts.org.
 - Local, regional and state authorities should create better options for the public to provide alerting feedback - especially complaints specific to the content, timing, and accessibility of alerts.
 - Local, regional and state authorities and utility providers should coordinate messaging between customer call centers, 211 call center, and regional PIOs.
 - Local, regional and state authorities and utility providers should do more targeted public outreach in shutoff zones in advance of PSPS, especially in areas that don't frequently experience PSPS.
10. Some regional PIOs didn't understand the difference between the different alerting modes and tools. Some PGE staff miscommunicated who was sending emergency alerts.
- Local and regional PIOs and PGE Comms staff need non-technical EAW training.
 - EAW technical specialists should be included in the Regional Joint Information System (R-JIS) during incidents that include EAW.

11. Community members expressed confusion about emergency alert and warning systems. *Who is sending which alerts? Why is my neighbor getting alerts that I'm not getting? How can I ensure I'm receiving alerts?*
 - All PSPS public messaging should include: [sign up for alerts](#), learn about [different types of alerts](#), enhance EAS accessibility with the [GoCC4ALL](#) app, and charge phones and backup batteries so you can continue to receive alerts once the power goes out.
 - RDPO DMWG should prepare social media content explaining how alerting systems work.

GENERAL MESSAGING

1. The PGE website has language and disability access issues that need to be resolved if regional partners are sending the public there for information.
 - The PGE website should get a professional language and disability access review, as well as a usability study. The RDPO DMWG should be consulted.
 - PGE emails and other public information should also be reviewed for plain language and disability access.
2. Many community complaints focused on PGE's PSPS map. It froze, it was difficult to navigate, zones were not well labeled, and it didn't include Community Resource Centers.
 - PGE staff agreed to work with Multnomah County and the RDPO DMWG to incorporate community input.
3. There was a need for improved communication about Community Resource Centers (CRCs).
 - CRCs are geographically spread out. Local, regional and state authorities should provide transportation support information in messaging.
 - Local, regional and state authorities and utility providers should clearly communicate who is providing CRC services and that it is not a "shelter." Be clear about whether a CRC is active when sharing information with the public.
4. Agencies were not prepared to take advantage of the public's attention to emergency preparedness. *What didn't you have? What do you need to replenish?*
 - The RDPO DMWG will develop this messaging for PublicAlerts and share with partners.
5. Partners noted that the PSPS could have coincided with an extreme heat event.
 - Local, regional and state authorities and utility providers should consider scenarios when PSPS coincides with concurrent emergencies and embed that into PSPS messaging plans.

LESSONS LEARNED SUMMARY

The RDPO is pleased to see continued engagement between PGE, the State of Oregon, impacted counties, and the public to incorporate lessons and improve pre-event planning, coordination, and exercising. Additionally, RDPO staff will share recently-acquired notes from the Bay Area's R-JIS on their PSPS events.

RDPO COMMUNITY SURVEY SUMMARY

In September and October 2022, the RDPO released a community survey to gather feedback regarding communication during the September PSPS event. This is a brief summary of the [survey results](#).

- 1) Some received too many alerts, some not enough. Many were grateful, some were annoyed, some were scared, some were angry.
- 2) Generally, alerts provided enough information about when and why power was being turned off.
- 3) Many said it was difficult to determine exactly who was in a PSPS area.
- 4) Some people in unaffected areas didn't understand why they received alerts and felt it was unnecessary stress. Others felt that alerting should be countywide since "people travel for work, school, and shopping within the county (or tri-county area)."
- 5) Some lost power unexpectedly and were poorly equipped to deal with medical issues.
- 6) Some scanned PGE messaging and didn't realize the power could be out for days. They assumed it was like other outages that last only a few hours.
- 7) Some messaging did not include actionable information about how to learn more, get help, and prevent wildfires.
- 8) There is a desire to know more about how decisions are made and what's being done to prevent PSPS in the future.
- 9) One person noted that it's difficult to find a WEA in cell phones after the initial message is received.
- 10) Weird alert reception patterns and "suspicious links" made people distrust the system.
- 11) In general, there is confusion about how alerting systems work.

REGIONAL ALERTING JUSTIFICATION

- Could help minimize negative public perception about counties (that they are in control of PSPS, that they are sending too many alerts this year, etc.).
- There are likely electricity-dependent and other vulnerable groups in the PSPS zones that might benefit from friends, family, and caregivers outside the PSPS zones knowing about the shutoff.
- There were likely houseless community members, short- and long-term renters, visitors, commuters, people who don't check their email frequently or set up filters on their email, and others in the region who wouldn't receive direct communication from PGE.
- A regional message could also be more comprehensive and include info about general outage and fire risks, smoke impacts, and encouragement to sign up for opt-in alerts.