

Weather Service launches early warning system

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Tornado Alley may sound like a theme-park ride, but in reality, it's the L-shaped strip of land winding from Texas to Minnesota that hosts some of the deadliest twisters in the country.

It's there--and in the midst of what meteorologists predict to be an "extremely active" hurricane season--that the National Weather Service's Dallas-Ft. Worth forecast office on Tuesday will launch a new way of coordinating with widely dispersed emergency personnel.

Let's say that meteorologists detect the signs of a storm brewing. It's weather service practice to give an early heads-up to local first responders and storm-spotting teams before the agency issues a public warning about impending weather dangers. Those few minutes of lead time can give emergency personnel time to get their operations centers in order before a possible deluge of calls and requests from the public.

Since last year, the Dallas-Ft. Worth office had been looking for a way to expedite that prenotification process across its bustling 49-county area, which counts about 7 million residents, according to a press release.

Before, staff at the busy office had been using a wide variety of manual notification methods, ranging from picking up a phone and calling small volunteer fire departments to sending out mass e-mail notifications with no automatic assurance that the messages had been received.

The office decided to implement AlertFind, a system developed by an Austin, Texas-based company called MessageOne, which also specializes in tools for backing up and restoring e-mail in the event of power outages or disasters. It began testing the system several months ago, said Michael Rosenfelt, MessageOne's executive vice president.

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