

Response of the Tolt Dam Early Warning System independent panel to the City of Seattle's request about their panel report and the recent Texas flood event.

7-30-2025

The panel was asked by the City of Seattle if the Texas riverine flash flood event changes any findings and recommendations in the panel's report titled "Independent Review of the Tolt Early Warning System and Dam Safety."

The City of Seattle established the Tolt Early Warning System (TEWS) independent review team after a long series of system false alarms and mis soundings which resulted in community distress and a loss of public trust in the system.

The Review Team's work occurred over a five-month period. The team reviewed an extensive body of materials, including official reports and records from involved regulatory and other agencies, community meetings (videos and written materials), surveys and other dam safety and TEWS materials. The team traveled to the area twice and met with representatives of the City of Seattle, the City of Carnation, King County Office of Emergency Management (OEM), King County Sheriff's Office, Eastside Fire and Rescue, NORCOM, FERC, the National Weather Service, the City of Duvall, Riverview School District, Carnation-Duvall Citizen Corps, Sno-Valley Senior Center, and Remlinger Farms.

The team transmitted their final report to the City of Seattle on June 30, 2025. Only five days later, the Texas hill country riverine flash flood occurred causing the tragic loss of at least 135 people. In light of this event, the team met to review each of their Tolt Dam Early Warning System final report findings and recommendations to determine whether any changes in their report's findings or recommendations should be considered as a result of readily available information about the Texas flood event. It is the team's understanding that their independent review report has not yet been publicly released.

It will be months before the full and accurate details and lessons learned of the Texas event are known and confirmed through an independent investigation. It is premature to identify which, if any, best practices for warning methods (e.g., reverse-911 calls to cell phones, sirens, weather alerts, personal outreach by local officials) might change for floods based on the Texas event, and how those might be applicable to the TEWS. As lessons learned from the Texas flood are eventually determined and documented, new information relevant to the state of practice for early warning systems, and potentially TEWS , may become available. The team noted that the Texas event was triggered by a riverine flash flood – not a dam failure flood.

Regardless of the type of flooding, it is the responsibility of the identified entities under state law to determine and implement the best warning and evacuation methods to use for

their unique situation and particular hazard. Our report includes the option of implementing a siren system if the responsible warning and evacuation entities (City of Carnation and King County) believe that a siren system would be of benefit. The report also recommends ways of simplifying the existing system to make it more reliable.

It is the team's opinion that the impacts of the Texas flood event on their report findings are:

- Finding 1.1 Tolt dam is continuously monitored, well-maintained, and safe. Its chance of failure is remote. This finding is not changed by the Texas riverine flash flood event.
- Finding 2.1 – There is a loss of confidence in the early warning system. This finding is not changed by the Texas riverine flash flood event. The team recognizes that people's assessments of the value of siren systems, including TEWS, may have changed as a result of the Texas riverine flash flood event and early reporting on it.
- Finding 2.2 – The early warning system is complex. High reliability cannot be guaranteed. This finding is not changed by the Texas riverine flood event.
- Finding 2.3 – Given modern warning technologies that are currently in place, the need for the siren system is questionable. This finding is not changed by the Texas riverine flash flood event. The considerations in the report specific to Tolt Dam and the TEWS are still applicable.
- Finding 3.1 – There is confusion about who is responsible for warning and evacuation. This finding is not changed by the Texas riverine flash flood event.
- Finding 3.2 – Under state law, King County and the City of Carnation are responsible for warning and evacuation. This finding is not changed by the Texas riverine flash flood event.
- Finding 3.3 – Current emergency management coordination efforts need improvement. This finding is not changed by the Texas riverine flash flood event.
- Finding 3.4 – Local emergency planning is improving but still needs work. This finding is not changed by the Texas riverine flash flood event.

The panel also reviewed our report's recommendations. None of the recommendations need to be changed as a result of the Texas riverine flash flood event.

The Texas riverine flash flood event is a vivid reminder that entities who have responsibility under state law for warning and evacuating people (the City of Carnation for their incorporated areas and King County for unincorporated areas) have a duty to plan for and implement emergency management practices for all hazards (not only for dam hazards). It is imperative that communities be prepared for floods from all sources, with well-coordinated and practiced emergency response plans.