



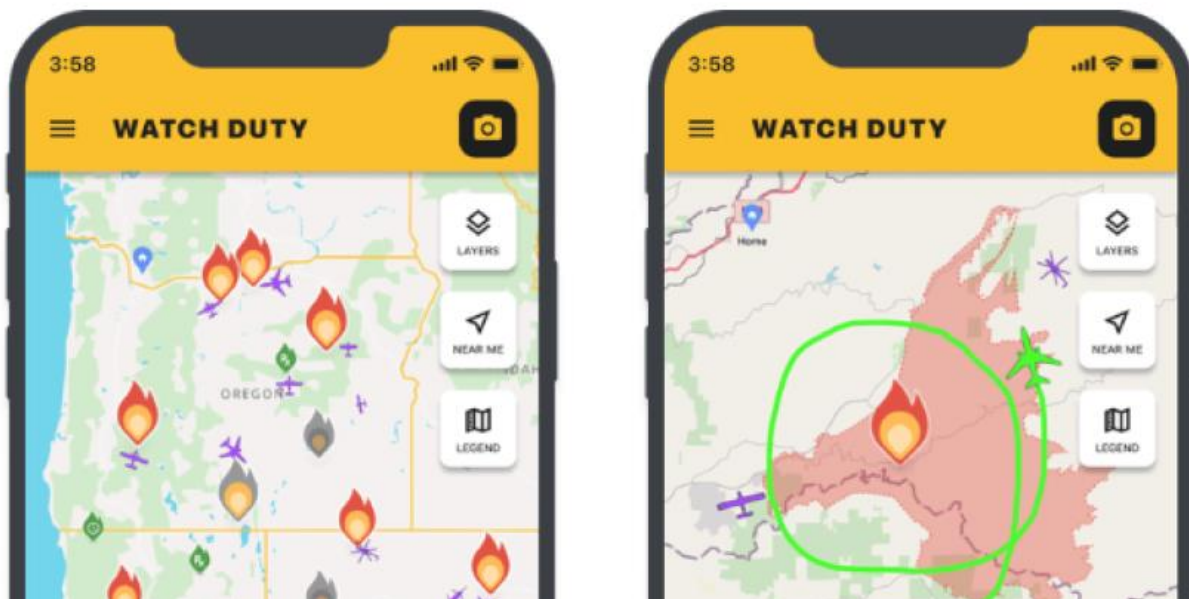
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## Outpacing Government? Lessons from Watch Duty's Rise

Watch Duty's success raises questions about why citizen-led tech is outpacing government emergency response efforts. The company's co-founder explores the lessons agencies can learn from this citizen-driven model.

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[Nikki Davidson](#)



Just weeks into the new year in California, 300-plus wildfires have left a trail of devastation and at least [29 lives lost](#). The devastation raises a question about

emergency response: Why didn't some residents receive critical emergency evacuation notifications from the government — and have instead turned to rely on Watch Duty, a privately operated app?

The Associated Press reports several residents who lost homes in the Eaton Fire [didn't receive evacuation](#) notifications. Los Angeles County officials have approved an outside review of how alerts functioned in the Eaton and Palisades fires in response to public demand.

Meanwhile, [Watch Duty](#), operated by nonprofit Sherwood Forestry Service, saw [explosive growth](#) during the crisis. The platform has a small staff of 15, working with a network of more than 150 volunteers including active and retired wildland firefighters, dispatchers, first responders and reporters who actively monitor radio scanners, wildfire cameras, social media and other public sources. The team creates a cultivated feed of intel about any particular fire in the coverage area. The service is free, with the option for a paid add-on of \$25 annual membership dues for users who seek extra features, such as flight tracking.

While Watch Duty gained more attention during the Los Angeles fires, it's been building a following for the last few years, even relied on by wildfire crews on scene such as [air tanker and helicopter pilots](#). Several public agencies have also partnered with Watch Duty, providing data to get information out faster. By the end of 2024, even before the Los Angeles wildfires had broken out, the service self-reported it had gained more than 500 million page views in 2024.

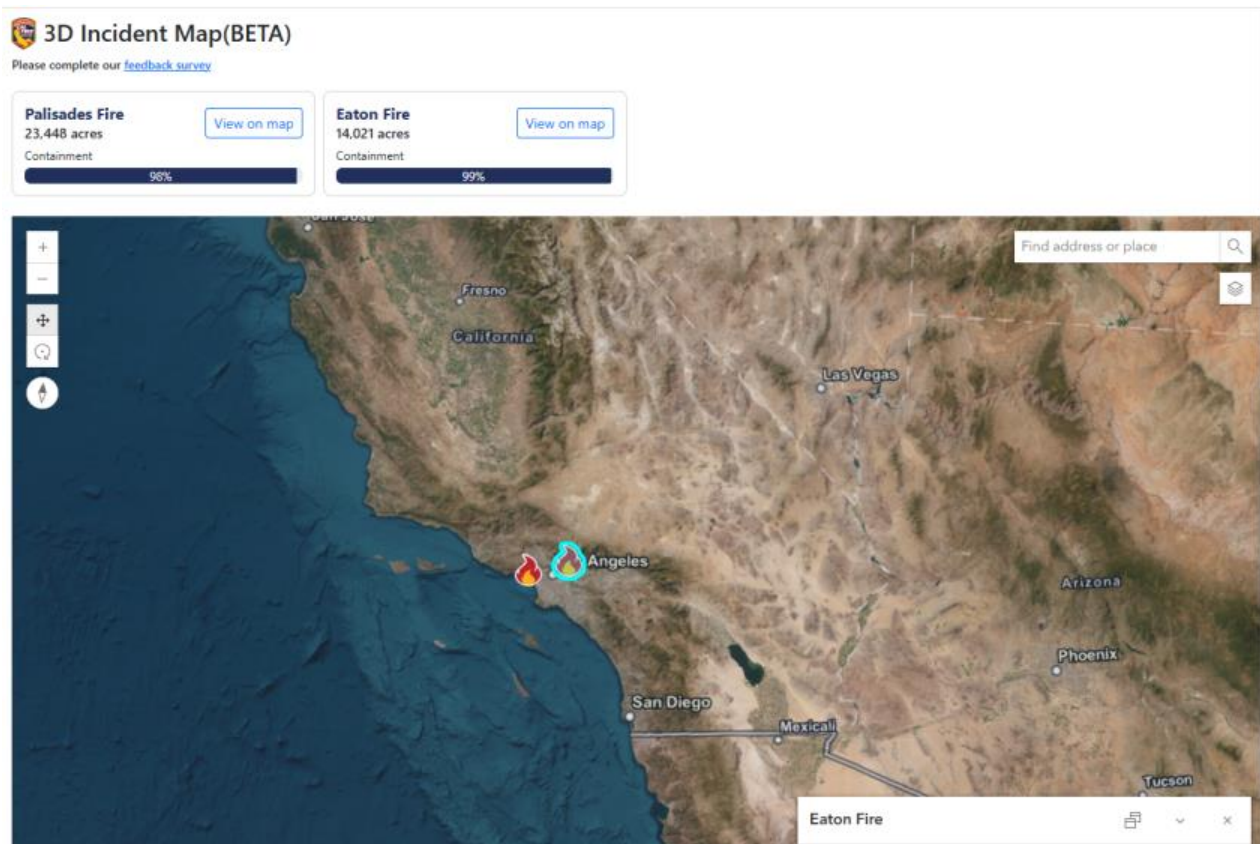
In an interview, *Government Technology* asked Watch Duty creator John Mills what governments can learn from his service's success. But Mills said the complex issue extends far beyond the actual tech involved in government emergency alerts systems.

“If I just handed the keys to the government and gave them Watch Duty, they wouldn't know what to do with it,” said Mills. “The problem is fires and disasters don't care about borders and boundaries. Tech is not the problem; software isn't going to save us.”

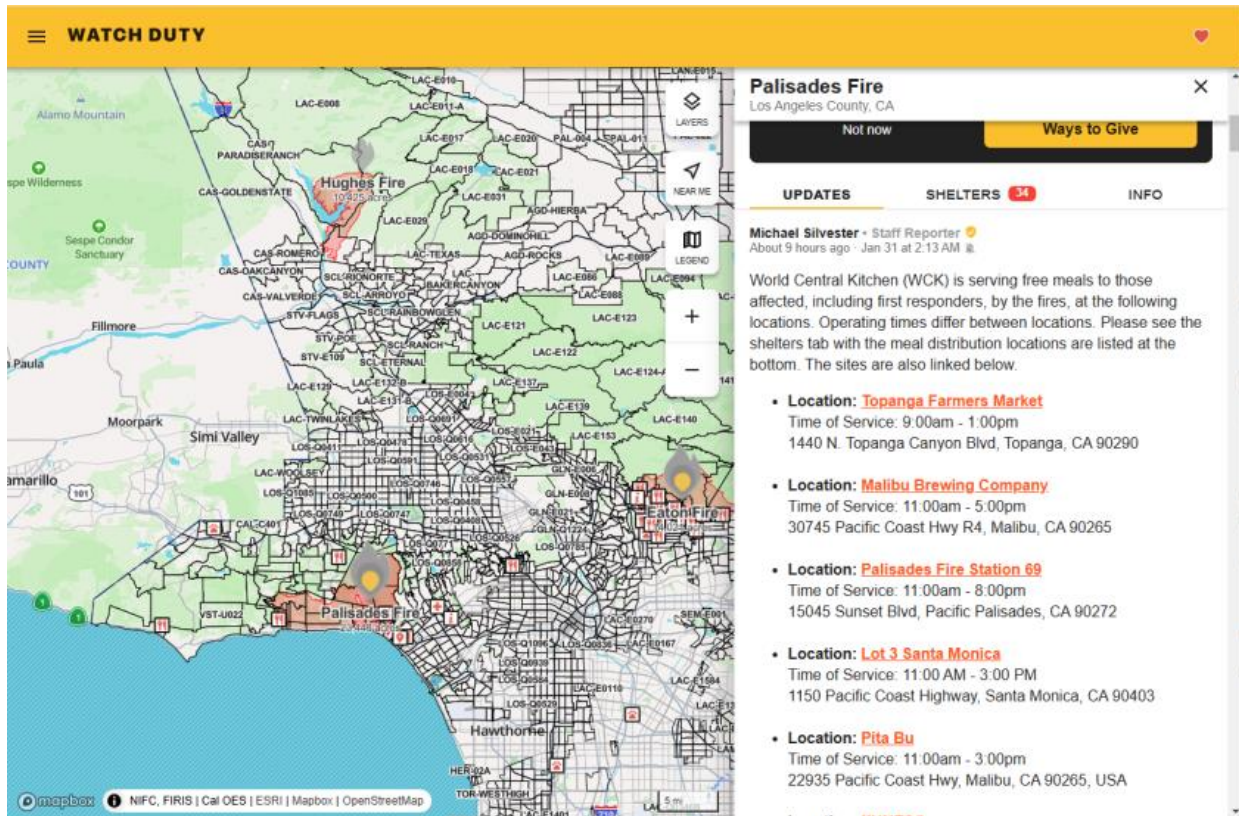
Rather, he feels the root of the issues lie in the way government agencies operate — stuck within boundaries and departments, each using different technologies and creating data silos that can cause complications in emergencies where conditions are constantly changing and invading new borders.

“The issue is the federal government, states, the U.S. Forest Service, CAL FIRE, the [California Natural Resources Agency] — everybody needs to work together, and

they do not do that well enough unfortunately to get ahead of this problem,” said Mills. ”This needs a bureaucratic overhaul in my opinion, we need to change this from the top to the bottom. We need to stop looking at disasters as some localized issue and that all the different areas can solve this problem on their own, because they can’t.”



While CAL FIRE has debuted a desktop beta version of a [3D incident map](#) powered by Esri that has information about fire conditions and evacuation zones, Watch Duty offers a similar map of fire perimeters, evacuation orders and shelters on a desktop and mobile phone app — as well as user-submitted photos and information from other government agencies, even content about businesses offering free meals and water. It’s a curated, social media-like feed of content tailored toward people in a fire’s area.



It's a concept Mills created after personally experiencing the frustration of navigating several sources to get the information he needed the most when the 2020 Walbridge Fire threatened his home in Sonoma County, Calif.

Initially, Mills faced resistance from public agencies hesitant to collaborate on information sharing. However, the app's growing popularity has become impossible to ignore, convincing more agencies to partner with Watch Duty and provide critical data.

"We work very closely with Orange County Fire, L.A. County, San Diego County, Ventura County and some of them are even using our map on their website," said Mills. "I don't know if we're the answer, but we are an answer to this problem. They're coming around honestly, so I'm happy to see that. It's not fast enough, but it's better than nothing."

Watch Duty's user metrics are compelling. The app boasts a 4.9 rating on the Apple App Store with nearly 30,000 reviews, and a 4.8 rating on Google Play. While some Google Play reviews mention technical issues such as crashes or desired feature enhancements (such as customizable alert sounds), the overall sentiment is overwhelmingly positive. A small fraction of negative reviews cite a lack of coverage

outside of the Western U.S., highlighting both the app's current scope and the potential demand for expansion.

Watch Duty's high user ratings include mentions of something that goes far beyond functionality; they reflect a deep level of trust. This trust is something government agencies often struggle to achieve, as evidenced by the need for resources like [California Fire Facts](#) website, an effort to combat misinformation during crises.

"We deliver quality product day in and day out without fail, without losing trust and being consistent," said Mills.

While currently focused on the western 22 states, Watch Duty has ambitions to expand eastward, resources permitting. Mills' vision extends beyond wildfire tracking, with plans to incorporate real-time monitoring and predictive analytics for other critical hazards like river flooding and threshold-based wind alerts.

"We're going to be the disaster platform for America and then maybe the world, that's the goal here," said Mills.

<https://www.govtech.com/biz/data/outpacing-government-lessons-from-watch-dutys-rise>