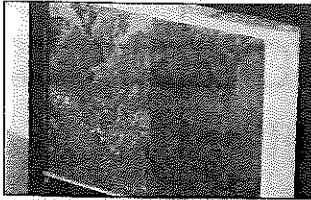


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Radar shows one of dozens of tornadoes that swept through the state on April 27.

## ALABAMA TORNADES

# Wording of warnings saved lives

### Weather conference focuses on impact of forecasters' choices

By Robin DeMonia

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The difference between life and death in a tornado can depend on weather forecasters' choices about when and how to issue warnings, a National Weather Service official said Monday.

The choices can determine how much time people have to seek cover and whether they believe they need to take cover, said Kevin Laws, the science and operation officer at the National Weather Service office in Birmingham.

"You have to put a lot of thought into it," said Laws, speaking at a National Weather Association conference in Hoover. "It's not just sitting behind desks, hitting a button."

The weather conference was scheduled before a rash of deadly tornadoes struck Alabama on April 27. But that outbreak has loomed large over the gathering, which is focused on how to improve forecasts and the potentially life-saving decisions that follow.

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Laws pointed to at least one case on April 27 in which a storm victim credited his decision to seek shelter — and his ultimate survival — to forecasters' choice to use the phrase "tornado emergency" and to mention his community by name.

The National Weather Service in Birmingham had rarely issued "tornado emergency" notices before the April 27 outbreak, Laws said. But it did so on 38 occasions that day, he said. In addition, the National Weather Service in Huntsville issued nine "tornado emergency" warnings, he said.

The phrase is used when a twister has been confirmed and poses a substantial threat to a populated area. There was little question on either front that day,

Laws said, because ample evidence was being captured on cameras everywhere. The images were dreadful, even to the experts.

"We just said, 'We're going to save as many lives as we can,'" Laws said.

The Birmingham office issued warnings for 95 percent of the tornadoes that struck that day, a rate that substantially exceeds the agency's overall 75 percent accuracy rate for detecting tornadoes, Laws said.

Still, close to 250 people died in Alabama because of the tornadoes, a fact that weighed heavily on those participating in the conference.

Russell Schneider, director of the NOAA-NWS Storm Prediction Center in Oklahoma, said the fatalities in Alabama and later in Joplin, Mo., interrupted a downward trend for tornado deaths that had continued since the Tri-State outbreak

killed 695 people in 1925.

"2011 has been a reminder that this nice gentle slope (of decline) was not be forever," he said. "It has been a real clarion call to us."

Trussville meteorologist Tim Coleman, who is a research scientist and adjunct professor at the University of Alabama in Huntsville, said power outages on April 27 may have played a role in the deaths in Alabama. "I don't believe that is the most likely explanation."

"We had numerous violent tornadoes that hit populated areas," he said. "A lot of people got killed in the basements, doing exactly what they were supposed to do."

Coleman spoke at the conference about the atmospheric forces that came together to produce such deadly storms. "It was an extremely rare event and one we hope to never see again," Coleman said.