

# Storms show limits of sirens

## Many missed early warnings, never heard tornado alarms

By Robin DeMonia  
rdemonia@bhamnews.com

Pre-dawn tornadoes that churned across Alabama on Monday showed the limits of sirens and highlighted the need for multiple warning devices as well as old-fashioned vigilance about the weather, meteorologists and disaster experts said.

John De Block, warning meteorologist coordinator for the National Weather Service in Birmingham, said the chance for unusual January tornadoes was amply forecast for central Alabama. While information is still being gathered, he said, it appears all of the serious storms Monday were accompanied by official warnings.

"We're not aware of a tornado that occurred in areas that weren't warned," he said.

But that doesn't mean everyone heard the warnings — a recurring issue that becomes even more of a problem when twisters strike overnight. Experts say too many people rely on sirens rather than relatively inexpensive NOAA weather radios or personal warnings such as text alerts offered by some county emergency management agencies and television stations.

"Those sirens are not designed to wake you up," said Allen Kniphfer, the director of

See SIRENS, Page 3C

## SIRENS:

From Page 1C

Jefferson County's Emergency Management Agency. "Weather radios — that's what we preach more than anything. It's your alarm clock."

At least two people died in Jefferson County as a result of the storms. In both cases, family members said they weren't aware of the danger until it was too late. One of the affected families was alerted by a relative's call, the other by the sound of the storm.

"It breaks my heart that two people died on my watch," said James Spann, chief meteorologist at ABC 33/40.

But Spann said people in harm's way Monday morning received at least 30 minutes' notice that they needed to go to a safe place, and they had much more notice that they needed to be on the lookout for bad weather.

"We started raising the flag on it Saturday. All day Sunday, we pushed it as hard as we could," he said. "I don't know what else we could do."

Spann, who criticizes sirens as outdated technology and worthless for overnight storms, said Monday he is to the point of urging that the devices be removed so Alabamians will move beyond what he calls "siren mentality."

"We've got to get rid of that, or it's going to kill a lot more Alabamians," he said.

Other experts agree that Alabamians need to rely less on sirens, which are used mostly to warn people outdoors and can't be heard at all in some places. Kniphfer said sirens have gotten less audible indoors as homes are outfitted with features such as better insulation and double-paned glass.

De Block said it's important for people to have multiple sources of weather alerts, because no technol-

ogy is foolproof. "We encourage everyone to have as many notifications as possible," he said.

A system to alert Alabamians to bad weather overnight is especially important. But experts agree that people need to be more watchful of the weather in general and be prepared when skies turn threatening. "Everyone needs to be ready in Alabama all year round," said De Block, who'd just met a Tuscaloosa County family whose first warning of the storm on Monday was the roof coming off their house. "Fortunately, there were no injuries."

Kniphfer said he believes people are more sensitive to bad weather now because of last April's deadly tornado outbreak, and he credits that for the fact that casualties Monday morning weren't worse.

But, he said, "Any time you have a fatality or injuries, it's way too many."