

Proposed Simplified Format for NWS Winter Hazards Messages

Product Description

Document (PDD)

October 1, 2013

Part 1 - Mission Connection

a. Product Description - The National Weather Service (NWS) conducted a “Hazard Simplification Demonstration” during the winter of 2012-2013. The objectives of this demonstration were to (1) Assess user understanding of NWS’ winter weather hazard messages (Watches, Warnings and Advisories; WWA), (2) Propose alternative message headlines using plain English, and (3) Collect public and partner comments on the proposed alternative.

For this demonstration, the alternative language and the current official WWA products were displayed in real-time, side-by-side on a non-operational webpage for easy comparison. Feedback was collected through a web-accessible survey and email. Over 6000 combined responses were received during the demonstration. As an additional benefit of the feedback process, many people suggested other alternatives and/or enhancements for simplification and clarification.

The winter demonstration of 2013-2014 will focus on incorporating some of the most frequently cited feedback into new text-based and graphical prototypes. Social science expertise will be engaged to refine the prototypes and lead focus groups to assess public response.

b. Purpose - The goal of this portion of the work is to apply social science research and risk communication principles to recommend enhancements to the current language NWS uses in its winter weather WWA headlines and message text to focus on brevity and increase clarity for the American public. Social science support shall provide recommendations on how to best utilize web- and/or GIS-enabled graphics to empower citizens to appropriately respond to observed and expected hazardous winter weather conditions. While this work focuses specifically on winter weather WWAs, it is important to document the process used to develop these new products so that it can be applied to other WWA types that may be reworked by NWS personnel in the future.

c. Audience - The audience includes the public, emergency managers, the media, academia, and other users. Social science expertise will be engaged to refine the prototypes and lead focus groups to assess public response. Social science can leverage WFO staff for additional data collection, development of winter weather WWA prototypes, and subsequent solicitation of feedback on these prototypes. By engaging WFO staff in the process they will be better able to implement similar processes for the application of the WWA format for other weather hazards beyond the winter weather suite.

d. Presentation Format – NOAA social science support will refine the NWS prototypes based upon results of information collection. NOAA social science support will provide sample prototypes developed by NWS staff.

e. Feedback Method - Following creation of new, improved prototypes, solicit feedback on the utility and interpretation of these products. This would likely be completed via survey, virtual focus groups, or telephone interviews. Additionally, since the prototypes will be web products, it should be possible to have prototypes posted on the web for feedback and have the opportunity to be viewed as they would if they were used for actual watches, warnings, and advisories.

Part II – Technical Description

a. Format and Science:

The NWS has utilized the WWA system for expressing the expectation of winter weather hazards for decades. The proposed alternative was developed by a team of personnel from NWS National and Regional HQ, NWS Weather Forecast Offices, the NWS Operations Proving Ground, and social scientists within NWS. The approach was also validated by external social scientists currently working on other NWS initiatives.

The proposed alternative was developed using a plain language approach, with the goal of enhancing understanding of our messages. In turn, the goal is to support improved decision making by users of NWS information, including public officials.

b. Proposed Simplified System

The demonstration utilized terms and phrases intended to reduce confusion and more clearly explain how the public should respond to expected winter weather hazards. The language in the proposed official headlines was translated to the proposed alternative headlines as follows:

THE NWS HAS ISSUED A _____ WATCH

was translated to

THE NWS FORECASTS THE POTENTIAL FOR _____

with the hazard type, level of certainty and expected impact(s) clearly stated in the rest of the hazards message.

THE NWS HAS ISSUED A (N) _____ ADVISORY

was translated to

THE NWS ADVISES CAUTION FOR _____

with the hazard type and expected impact(s) clearly stated in the remainder of the hazards message.

THE NWS HAS ISSUED A _____ WARNING

was translated to

THE NWS HAS ISSUED A WARNING FOR A _____

with the hazard type and expected impact(s) clearly stated in the remainder of the hazards message.

We will retain the term “Warning” because of its direct connection to protection of life and property but plan to eliminate the individual hazard products within the Warning category.

c. Additional Information - Please contact:

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