

Warnings to keep people out of harm's way

On the Sappa
Steve Haynes



Our northwest Kansas weather forecasters are unhappy that three people died in a fiery pileup near Rexford earlier this year, despite a forecast for high winds and the possibility of blowing dust.

Dave Floyd, warning coordinator for the Goodland weather office, said the National Weather Service had the forecast right, predicting high winds and issuing a warning more than two days ahead of the storm.

Still, dozens of people drove into a dust cloud that blotted out visibility west of Rexford on Jan. 16. Three died in the fiery 11-vehicle mashup that resulted.

What were they doing on the road? And why did they all just keep driving when they couldn't see a thing?

While there could be more questions than answers, one is that people tend to go about their business unless they hear of actual danger. If the weather service issues a tornado watch, for instance, indicating tornadoes are possible today, no one goes home and waits for one to form. School classes continue. Work goes on.

If there's a tornado warning, however, it's different. Most of us head for the basement or a nearby shelter. School kids gather in safe places and hunker down. Sirens sound. Even then, more often than not, nothing happens, and of course, that's part of the problem.

Mr. Floyd points out that no one has died in a tornado in northwest Kansas in the last decade, but five people have been killed in dust storms. However, neither the warning system nor the terminology used is the same between the two types of storm.

People here are used to the lexicon of tornado watches and warnings. We have severe thunderstorm warnings all the time, tornadoes most summers. Dust storms are less frequent, and the technology to detect them on the ground isn't as advanced. Weather radar today can show a tornado, but dust storms form under the radar, as it were.

In the case of the Rexford storm, where only a couple of miles of road downwind from field that was blowing were involved, by the time a weather warning could have been issued, it would have been too late.

One partial answer might be to align the terminology. A high wind warning doesn't sound life threatening. A tornado warning does. Would a dust storm warning, accompanied by instructions not to drive into a dust cloud, be more effective. Should a "dust storm watch" be issued with a high-wind warning?

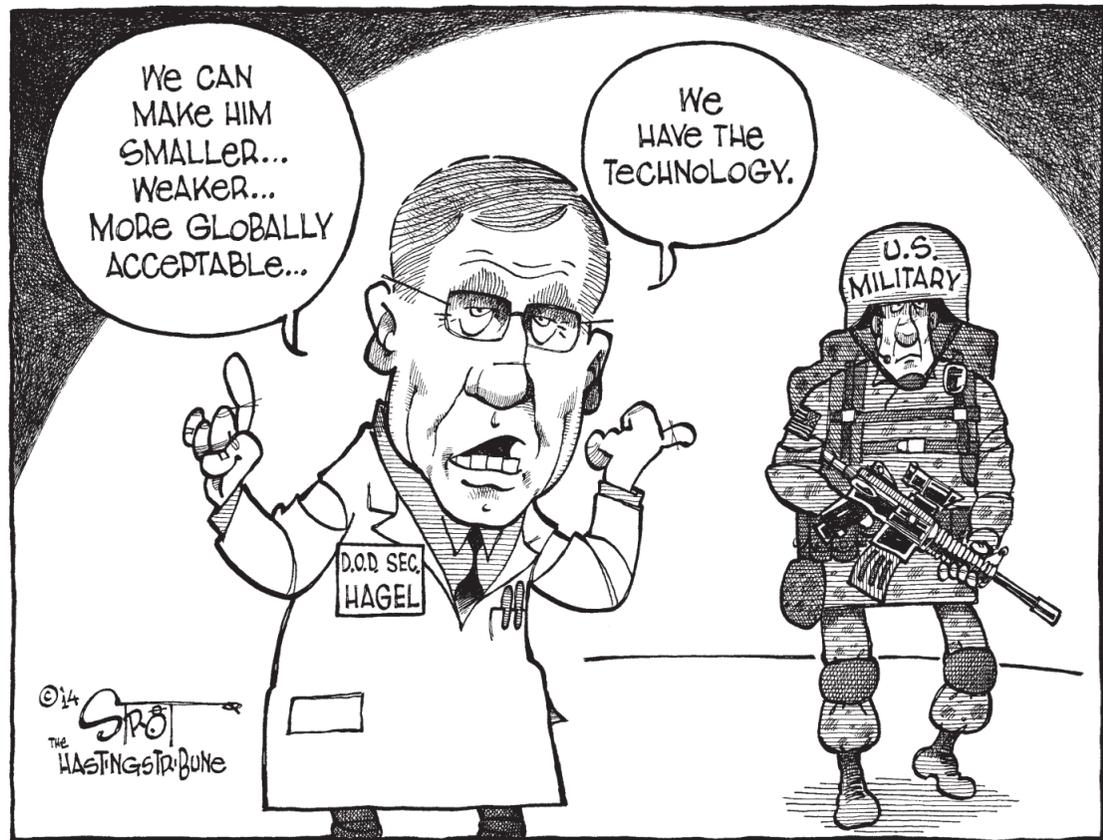
Tornado and severe-thunderstorm warnings today include similar instructions. Again, teaching people what to do when facing a dust storm is a problem. Most people don't know. Most just keep driving and pray, and sometimes, that doesn't work. You can't stop without the threat of being run into, and you can't drive on without the threat of running into something you can't see.

The best advice we've heard came from the Sherman County sheriff's office, where an officer advised us that the only safe thing to do is to turn a right angle to the road and proceed slowly until he feels the fence. Turn your lights off and wait out the dust.

Driving on a dusty day, it may be hard to tell when to get off the road, but it's critical if you want to live.

Above all else, when it's apparent that lives are in danger, the service should be able to send a message to all cell phones in an area urging people to take action. To some extent, that's possible today, but warnings have to be limited to immediate danger.

If we're to get a beep on our phones every time a child is kidnapped, then why not get one when we might be about to die, telling us to get out of harm's way.



The most important thing is family

Out Back
Carolyn Plotts



I have always said that if the house caught on fire, the first thing I would grab on my way out the door would be family pictures.

My nephew, Jeff, was put to that test last week when the home he and his wife, Lori, had made with their four children, burned to the ground. I was very proud of his first reaction that all that mattered was his family was safe.

It's not known yet how the fire started. Jeff said they had been watching TV in front of the fireplace when they smelled smoke. He turned off the fireplace and followed the smoke to their upstairs. He said Lori already had the kids and dogs outside. As he was coming down the stairs he saw flames coming out of the wall and realized it was time to go.

Jeff and Lori live in a smallish college town in the eastern part of the state. "Laugh all you want at little red neck burgers," Jeff said in an e-blast to

family, "but you don't want to be anywhere but a small town when something like this happens to you." He said the people there have genuinely responded to their needs simply as a matter of course.

It's good to know they have folks there who care about them, since their family is so far away.

Looking on the practical side, Jeff is thankful that his sister-in-law/insurance agent talked them into buying really good insurance when they bought their house. He said they are being well taken care of and don't really need any-

thing. He said a bright spot was that one of his little girl's stuffed animals, "Big Baby" was found under a pile of rubble and "heroic life-saving measures" are being taken to restore him. He said "Baby" is something of a cause celeb and he thinks the whole town would like to be there when they surprise her with it.

So, life goes on. Kids still need to be fed, a livelihood needs to be earned, forms need to be filled out and dirty clothes need to be washed. Children are resilient and can handle anything as long as they are confident in their parents' love. Adults suffer most because they are aware of what's been lost. But it is also the time when you can evaluate what's really important. And it's not "stuff"....it's people. More specifically, family.

Western farm show a great success

Insight
John Schlageck



Billed as, nearly everything an agribusiness professional would need or want, this year's 53rd edition of the Western Farm Show lived up to its slogan. More than 20,000 farmers, ranchers, school children, FFA youngsters and urbanites attended the three-day event at the American Royal Complex in Kansas City.

Farmers and ranchers spent hours walking around the 400,000 square feet of displays of machinery, buildings, livestock equipment, tools, feed and seed among the more than 500 exhibits.

Veteran Douglas County farmer Rex Slankard has been coming to this farm show since it started in 1961. Like so many of his peers, he attends the annual event to walk around and see what's new.

Slankard likes to compare the equipment and machinery to what he farms with. He's seen plenty of changes in agriculture and farm machinery during the last 50 years.

"Everything is getting to be so much about computer technology in farming today," Slankard says. "I'm getting too old for it. I've got to bring my grandson along to figure the computers out."

All kidding aside, the veteran producer believes farming is better with the new technology. Today's equip-

ment lasts longer and is more dependable.

With technology like GPS a farmer can use the same tracks in his field every year and that cuts down on compaction, the Douglas County producer says. Planting and putting on herbicides and insecticides is more accurate and saves on production costs.

Coffey County stockman and hay producer, Jim McNabb traveled 200 miles round trip to attend this year's event. His son, Lee, accompanied him as well as his grandson, Max.

For the McNabbs and many other farmers and ranchers within a 300 mile radius, the Western Farm Show is a family tradition.

"It's enjoyable to take the family on a road trip off the farm and look at the latest equipment," McNabb says.

The biggest differences he sees during the 30 years of attending the show is the cost of the tractors, balers, buildings and other farm machinery.

McNabb is all business when checking out the new haying equipment. He puts up between 500 and 1,000 bales each year to feed his hungry herd during the winter months so idle chit chat is out of the question.

"There are just too many people here," McNabb says. "Every once in a while you run into someone you know, but you can talk to them at home."

While most of the farm show-goers include farmers and ranchers from Iowa, Kansas, Missouri and Nebraska, more than 3,400 high school students affiliated with FFA attend the three-day event, says Jeff Flora. He works for the SouthWestern Association and produces and manages the Western Farm Show.

Many people in the Kansas City area grew up on a farm or still have parents farming, Flora says. They drop by to look at the farm equipment and show their children what's happening in agriculture.

"This show provides a great opportunity to talk to manufacturers and suppliers without experiencing the pressure of buying such equipment," he says. "It kind of blows some of us away seeing what's going on in this industry today. It's like Star Wars kind of stuff in some cases."

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ISSN 1063-701X

215 S. Kansas Ave., Norton, KS 67654

Published each Tuesday and Friday by Haynes Publishing Co., 215 S. Kansas Ave., Norton, Kan. 67654. Periodicals mail postage paid at Norton, Kan. 67654.

Postmaster: Send address changes to Norton Telegram, 215 S. Kansas, Norton, Kan. 67654

Official newspaper of Norton and Norton County. Member of the Kansas Press Association, National Newspaper Association, and the Nebraska Press Association

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