How Watch Duty’s wildfire tracking app became a crucial lifeline for LA

If you live in Los Angeles, you are probably already intimately familiar with Watch Duty, the free app that shows active fires, mandatory evacuation zones, air quality indexes, wind direction, and a wealth of other information that everyone, from firefighters to regular people, have come to rely on during this week’s historic and devastating wildfires.

Watch Duty is unique in the tech world in that it doesn’t care about user engagement, time spent, or ad sales. The 501(c)(3) nonprofit behind it only cares about the accuracy of the information it provides and the speed with which the service can deliver that information. The app itself has taken off, rocketing to the top of Apple’s and Google’s app stores. Over 1 million people have downloaded it over the last few days alone.

The elegance of the app lies in its simplicity. It doesn’t scrape user data, show ads, require any kind of login, or track your information. Its simple tech stack and UI — most of which is maintained by volunteer engineers and reporters — has likely helped save countless lives. While Watch Duty is free to use, the app accepts tax-deductible donations and offers two tiers of membership that unlock additional features, like a firefighting flight tracker and the ability to set alerts for more than four counties.

With plans to expand the service across the United States, as well as overseas and into other emergency services, Watch Duty may eventually replace some of the slower and less reliable

local government alert systems for millions of people.

a:hover]:shadow-highlight-franklin dark:[&>a:hover]:shadow-highlight-franklin [&>a]:shadow-underline-black dark:[&>a]:shadow-underline-white”>An app born from fire

The idea for Watch Duty came to cofounder John Mills while he was trying to protect his off-grid Sonoma County home from the Walbridge fire in 2020. He realized there wasn’t a single source for all the information people needed to protect themselves from the blaze, which ultimately killed 33 people and destroyed 156 homes. John and his friend David Merritt, who is Watch Duty’s cofounder and CTO, decided to build an app to help.

“This came out of an idea that John had, and he talked to me about it four years ago,” Merritt tells *The Verge*. “We built the app in 60 days, and it was run completely by volunteers, no full-time staff. It was a side project for a lot of engineers, so the aim was to keep it as simple as possible.”

Fire reporting is piecemeal at best in fire-prone areas and frequently scattered across platforms like Facebook and X, where fire departments and counties have verified pages sharing relevant updates. But increasingly, social media platforms are putting automated access for alert services behind paywalls. Governments also use a wide variety of alert systems, causing delays that can cost lives, especially in fast-moving fires like the Palisades and Eaton fires that have forced evacuations for more than 180,000 people. And sometimes, these government-run alerts are sent out mistakenly, causing mass confusion.

Watch Duty simplifies all that for millions of people.

“We view what we are doing as a public service,” says Merritt. “It is a utility that everyone should have, which is timely, relevant information for their safety during emergencies. Right now, it’s very scattered. Even the agencies themselves,

which have the best intentions, their hands are tied by bureaucracy or contracts. We partner with government sources with a focus on firefighting.”

“We view what we are doing as a public service.”

One of the biggest issues around fires, in particular, is that they can move quickly and consume large swaths of land and structures in minutes. For example, the winds that drove the Palisades fire to spread to more than 10,000 acres reached 90 miles per hour on Tuesday. When minutes matter, the piecemeal alert system that Watch Duty replaces can cause delays that cost lives.

“Some of the delivery systems for push notifications and text messages that government agencies use had a 15-minute delay, which is not good for fire,” says Merritt. “We shoot to have push notifications out in under a minute. Right now, 1.5 million people in LA are getting push notifications through the app. That’s a lot of messages to send out in 60 seconds. In general, people are getting it pretty much all at the same time.”

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