Computers Replace Humans Reading Weather Reports

Rachel D'oro, Associated Press

Anchorage, Alaska (AP) — Two outpost offices of the National Weather Service in Alaska are finally ending what has been a bygone practice for most of the nation for almost two decades — using real human voices in radio forecast broadcasts.

The Nome and Kodiak offices are switching to computerized voices that nationally go by the names of Tom, Donna and, in some parts of the country, Spanish-speaking Javier. It's an idea first hatched in the mid-1990s as part of a move to modernize the weather service, an agency of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

Local weather forecasts are a big deal to many people in Alaska because, more than in some other parts of the United States, the forecasts can be a matter of life and death. The forecasts are broadcast on NOAA's weather radio network.

In Nome and Kodiak, weather reports are crucial for many because of the severe weather that can affect fishing vessels in far-flung regions, including the Bering Sea (think of the violent storms on the cable television show "The Deadliest Catch") and the Gulf of Alaska.

Knowing what the weather will do is also extremely important to pilots and passengers needing to get to larger cities. Kodiak is on an island, and Nome is on the western coast with no roads to link it to another major Alaska hub city.

The weather forecasts are so important that they are also broadcast over radio stations in Nome, including KNOM, which first reported the changes.

The Nome office briefly activated the technology this week through the Fairbanks office, one of three forecast offices in Alaska. Other smaller outpost offices scattered throughout the state have already gone the digital voice route.

A technological kink, however, prompted the Nome office to go back to local weather service employees reading the forecasts until the problem is rectified in the near future, officials said.

It's a job that meteorological technician Robert Murders dreaded when he first moved to Nome, an old gold rush town about 550 miles northwest of Anchorage. Then he got to enjoy reading the forecasts. He was watching the Discovery Channel reality show, "Bering Sea Gold," last season when he heard one of his own broadcasts in the background.

"That was kind of cool," Murders said.

But he also recognizes the speed and efficiency of using the automated voices, which are updated immediately, even if no one is in the office.

There is no target date for making the switch at the service office in Kodiak, located on the island of the same name. Angel Corona, with the weather service's data-acquisition branch in Anchorage, said work is underway to patch that office with the Anchorage forecast office for the broadcasts.

The Nome and Kodiak offices are being brought into the digital-voice era as part of a national initiative involving improvements to the system, Corona said. Alaska is the only state that still has such smaller outposts, while similar offices were closed long ago in the lower 48.

Other sites to be converted later to digital voices are in the U.S. territories of Guam, American Samoa and Northern Mariana islands, officials said.

Wherever the digital voices are deployed, they can be customized to pronounce locations accurately.

Tom, Donna and Javier are a huge improvement over the first voice introduced so long ago. There was some dissatisfaction with that voice, dubbed Paul, who sounded like a Scandinavian robot. The voices used today have been better received.

"It sounds pretty good," Corona said. "It sounds like a computer, but you can understand it."

That's all that matters to Lucas Stotts, the Nome harbormaster. That and getting weather updates as quickly and accurately as possible, he said.

Besides, he said, some humans read those reports in monotone voices anyway.

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