

Summary of Public Comments Made on the Homeland Security Advisory System

HOMELAND SECURITY ADVISORY SYSTEM REVIEW

NOTE: The following is a summary of the 141 public comments (as of 9/1) submitted via HSASReview@dhs.gov concerning the alteration of the current Homeland Security Advisory System.

Summary

Of the comments that were sent to the Department of Homeland Security's public forum website, an overwhelming majority (82%) were in favor of replacing or altering the current Homeland Security Advisory System (HSAS). A significant number of those comments were in favor of scrapping the system altogether, finding the system more of a useless nuisance than anything else. Only 18% of responders offered support for the current system, citing familiarity as the main argument. 16.5% of respondents pushing for a change recommended moving from colors to using a numbers system making it the most common alternative system suggestion. Scrapping the system and changing to words/alerts was favored by 11% of those advocating a change and 5% of the respondents favored changing the colors to a stop-light based system (green, yellow, red).

Comments in Favor of Changing the HSAS

Among the public voice, the colors were the most common critique of the HSAS. Many felt that the HSAS uses fear tactics and that the system lacks any real credibility due to its ambiguity. Many suggested switching to a three-color graduated system, since the bottom two colors, blue and green, have never been used. Incorporating a numerical scale or a warning system like that of the National Weather Service were also popular suggestions. Most people voiced their concern for the political manipulation behind the system and the need to infuse more specific information and possible action plans with the threats. Another popular opinion was to incorporate words with a threat level, such as "1: Imminent Attack." 13% of the comments in favor of a change were in favor of scrapping any sort of alert system completely. Also, it is important to note that many people felt that the system lost credibility when it alerted the entire nation for threats that were regional in nature.

The following are examples of the types of comments received that expressed a desire to change HSAS or discontinue alerts all together:

Colors

"A more practical system would be that of Green, Yellow, Red, like the colors from a stoplight. A system such as that would be easy for at a glance terror alert level updates, would be easy to comprehend, and wouldn't include colors that are more than likely never going to be used."

Threat-Specific

"Information would be accepted better if it were threat specific..."

Numbers

"I propose a 1-2-3 numbering system.

People understand the use of "Three" very well - from parents to fans. Young children will easily be able to identify. This would be useful in a public relations campaign.

These numbers would be:

Low (1), Moderate (2) and High risk (3)."

Bulletins/Alerts

"Please eliminate the color coded threat levels. Rather, when intelligence perceives higher than normal threat level, simply have a special alert status for terrorism. When the intelligence wanes, remove the special alert. So it's either ON or OFF binary, not multiple levels."

Watch/Warning System

"We should have three defined terror alert levels:

Normal = (Understood) We all know that an attack is always possible, we don't need a persistent "yellow" to remind us.

Watch = Be on the lookout and start preparing the response plans for a possible attack or threat.

Warning = An attack or threat is imminent or underway; execute the response plan now"

"Watches and warnings would be issued by DHS on a local or regional or national basis where and when they were needed. Additional instructions and details specific to the the threat should be provided with the text of the alert, while the "Watch" or "Warning" qualifier simply conveys what type of action should be taken in response."

More Specificity

"It also seems like it might not be such a bad idea to eliminate nation-wide levels to begin with. I imagine that when there is reason to raise an alert, it would (hopefully) be good enough information to alert just one city or sector. Even if the information is more general, I have a hard time believing that anything anyone outside of big cities did would have any effect in the event of an attack. In the worst case, that there is good information but absolutely no location, I think the best course of action would be to raise levels in major cities and then alert all federal agencies to be on higher alert (without actually sending a nationwide alert). The less the system is used, the more useful it should become."

"As usual, use the news media when you need to get the word out. News media are national, regional, and local. Potential security situations usually fit the regional and local attributes, so the national HSAS generally has no application, but if a national issue is imminent or happening, the media will spread the word immediate. We don't need an extra system overlaying media coverage."

Get Rid of System

"Please eliminate this useless system, and do not replace it with anything."

Comments in Favor of Retaining the HSAS

18% of responders did express their desire to see the HSAS kept as it currently operates. The most common argument for this was that many state and local organizations, either from the government or private sector, have already begun to develop their precautionary measures in accordance with the advisory system. They feel that if a new system is put in place, all of the previous work spent trying to align with HSAS would be wasted. These comments also highlighted the usefulness of the simplicity of the colors. Contrastingly, some expressed their desire to keep the system not because of its usefulness, but because they felt the government could be focusing their efforts elsewhere on more important issues.

“If used appropriately the system gives us a wake-up call that something is up. It clues us in that we should do a prep for any hazard that might be in our area and could be a possible target. Yes the level hasn't been raised in a while but that might be a good thing since others have done their job! As a firefighter/EMT I vote for minimal changes that make sense!”

“As an employee at a Federal facility and Amateur (HAM) Radio operator, I find the Color-coded system useful. It easily shows (and reminds) us to take security precautions. Most Americans will not understand a complex, long winded explanation. Colors are simple and people associate the color with the description of the level. I think the color-coded system is an effective way to show the public the threat level without frightening them with details or disclosing classified information.”

“My big concern is we are all out here getting our plans to match yours and then you change yours. We will all be starting over again. What is the long term cost in this. Plans need to be redone, manuals need to be reprinted. Is that really worth it? I think if you give the system a few more years you will find the locals will finally catch up and match yours. If you change it you will once again have several different systems out here.”

“It is a simple way to let the citizens of this great nation know where we stand with respect to our country being threatened.”