



MERRIMACK FIRE RESCUE

432 Daniel Webster Highway
Merrimack New Hampshire 03054
603.424.3690 ♣ Fax 603.424.0603

Fire Chief
Michael P. Currier

Assistant Fire Chief
Anthony D. Stowers

Assistant Fire Chief
Richard W. Pierson

Emergency Management Bulletin

First-Ever National EAS Test Will Come From the White House

By: Rick Wimberly on March 21, 2011

For the first time, the White House will take over the nation's airwaves to speak to the American public through the Emergency Alert System (EAS). The FCC recently ordered all participants in the EAS to take part in a national test later this year. While state and local officials throughout the nation regularly use the EAS, a president has never used it — not even for a test.



And now, government officials want to see how the EAS would work should a president ever need to use it — especially since the state of the national EAS system has been under question. “EAS is an important alerting tool,” according to a 2009 report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO). “But it exhibits longstanding weaknesses that limit its effectiveness.”

In its report, the GAO cited “a lack of reliability of the message distribution system, gaps of coverage, insufficient testing and inadequate training of personnel” as some of the EAS' weaknesses.

FEMA's Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS), in partnership with the FCC, is responsible for the EAS. And in an online “town meeting,” FEMA Assistant Administrator Damon Penn, whose National Continuity Programs Directorate includes IPAWS, recently told broadcasters that “we have to show the courage to have a test so we know what works and doesn't work.”

IPAWS has initiatives in progress to address concerns, one of which is sharply increasing the number of Primary Entry Point (PEP) stations. PEP stations are the broadcast facilities that first receive alerts and, in effect, relay them to other EAS participants — broadcast, cable and certain satellite programming. FEMA is expanding the number of PEP stations from 37 to 74, noting that the PEP stations will soon cover 90 percent of the nation's population, even without the relay to other EAS participants. At the same time, more PEP stations are being added, and all of them are being improved with new generators and tighter security.

A new satellite system will provide another path for communicating with PEP stations. “Satellite infrastructure can be fully integrated with the legacy EAS and initially provides a reliable, redundant commercial system utilizing multiple uplinks and satellites for national level EAS distribution,” the IPAWS website states. “An XM Radio transmission path will be complete in the first quarter of 2010, and direct satellite connectivity will be available to the national PEP stations in the third quarter of 2010.”

Other initiatives include requiring EAS participants to upgrade their equipment to handle the new Common Alerting Protocol (CAP) messaging standard and digital communications. The FCC has given broadcasters, cable operators and EAS satellite program participants until the end of September to install new equipment.

This means virtually every broadcast and cable facility in the U.S. will be required to invest several thousand dollars in new equipment. During the online broadcasters' forum, Jim Barnett, chief of the FCC's Public Safety and Homeland Security Bureau, said the commission is evaluating whether to extend the deadline a second time. The original deadline was extended after broadcasters argued that sufficient time had not been provided to get new equipment in place. Penn said equipment testing is under way, and FEMA's Responder Knowledge Base will post names of equipment that passes.

While the enhancements won't be fully in place this year, federal officials still want the test conducted in 2011. Exact timing of the test currently is unknown: Date, time of day and length of the test are White House decisions, Penn told the broadcasters' town hall meeting. Officials will, however, be sensitive to timing, he said, adding that they'd like to avoid hurricane season, Thanksgiving, elections and the Christmas advertising season.

Timing ultimately will be critical, particularly considering that most radio stations, TV stations, cable outlets and certain satellite programming in the nation will be broadcasting the same message at the same time, including attention-getting tones. This has never happened before. Since the early 1950s when the EAS' predecessor was launched, no president has ever seized national programming.

Considering the test's magnitude, public overreaction is a concern. Outreach will be an important part of the test, according to broadcasters and federal officials. Penn said several levels of outreach are needed. The first level is public outreach, "so when people see the message, they won't think it's an emergency."

Broadcasters are expected to play a big part in public outreach. When two White-House-to-FEMA-to-Alaska tests were conducted — one in 2010 and one in January 2011 — broadcasters aggressively provided advance notice of the test to their audiences. "Alaska broadcasters really made the test a success," Penn said. In its order establishing the national test, the FCC said outreach will be a "major aspect of preparation," and directed its staff to work with federal partners and other stakeholders to "disseminate notice of the test as widely as possible through as many outlets as possible."

In addition to broadcasters, local emergency management and other public safety officials will also be encouraged to spread the word to the public to help avoid over-reaction. 911 organizations will need to know about it to prepare for calls from concerned citizens.

After the public, Penn said the next level of outreach involves training station operators so they'll know how to react to the test. However, the biggest part of outreach, Penn said, is to emergency managers. "We need to make them understand how important this is and get their support."

In fact, Penn encouraged broadcasters to engage state and local emergency managers and help them understand the “importance of what we’re trying to do.”

Emergency managers also need to understand how committed broadcasters are to the EAS, he added. Gordon Smith, president of the National Association of Broadcasters, said alerting is the “highest and best use of broadcasters’ spectrum and facilities.” Even though CAP means “one message can be sent across many platforms,” he said, “broadcast radio and television stations will remain the backbone of EAS.”

Although the CAP protocol may not be in position in time for the national test, it is at the heart of the nation’s alerting plans. Penn told the broadcasters that recent outreach has focused on the state level to show how important CAP messaging is and “how important it is we have a system that’s compatible.” And outreach, he said, is beginning to broaden to local officials.

A number of commercial alert providers have signed up to adapt their technology so they can originate or receive CAP messages through the IPAWS infrastructure that FEMA is building. Through it, alerting authorities from local, state, tribal and territorial agencies will be able to use alert origination tools, mostly from commercial companies, to activate alerts through IPAWS. Those alerts can be disseminated through the EAS or other systems such as the Commercial Mobile Alert System (CMAS).

CMAS will give alerting authorities the ability to send alerts for imminent threats or Amber Alerts to mobile devices in targeted geographic areas without needing the public to sign up.

It’s all part of an initiative, ordered by Congress and the White House, for FEMA to make alerts and warnings effective for not only the president, but also for local officials. This includes providing multiple means of communications. But in a serious event, as the FCC’s Barnett puts it, “EAS may be the only way the president could communicate with the American public.”

Rick Wimberly is president of Galain Solutions Inc., a consultancy with two practice areas: alerts, notifications and warnings; and selling and marketing to government. He also provides market research, training and government sales assessment services.