

CRS Report for Congress

The Emergency Alert System (EAS) and All-Hazard Warnings

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Summary

The Emergency Alert System (EAS) is built on a structure conceived in the 1950's when over-the-air broadcasting was the best-available technology for widely disseminating emergency alerts. It is one of several federally managed warning systems. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) jointly administers EAS with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), in cooperation with the National Weather Service (NWS), an organization within the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). The NOAA/NWS weather radio system has been upgraded to an all-hazard warning capability. Measures to improve the NOAA network and the new Digital Emergency Alert System (DEAS) are ongoing.

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS), working with the Association of Public Television Stations, is implementing a program that will disseminate national alert messages over digital broadcast airwaves, using satellite and public TV broadcast towers. Legislation was passed at the end of the 109th Congress (the Warning, Alert, and Response Network Act, or WARN Act, as signed into law as Title VI of P.L. 109-347) to assure funding to public television stations to install digital equipment to handle national alerts. The law also required the establishment of a committee to provide the FCC with recommendations regarding the transmittal of emergency alerts by commercial mobile service providers to their subscribers. Committee recommendations provided the structure for a Commercial Mobile Alert System (CMAS). In addition to presidential alerts, which clearly are a federal responsibility, the service would transmit emergency alerts generated by state, local, and other non-federal authorities. Implementation of CMAS is in abeyance until a federal agency can be identified to take on the role of receiving, verifying, and transmitting non-federal alerts to cell phone operators. Legislation may be required to resolve this impasse.

In the 110th Congress, S. 1223 (Senator Landrieu) and its companion bill, H.R. 2331 (Representative Melancon), would authorize funds to strengthen the radio broadcasting infrastructure that supports the Emergency Alert System. It would also provide for a pilot Broadcast Disaster Preparedness Grant Program. H.R. 2787 (Representative Ellsworth) would require the installation of weather radios in new manufactured (mobile) homes. H.R. 2787, known as CJ's Law, was passed by the House and is awaiting action in the Senate.

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The Emergency Alert System (EAS) and All-Hazard Warnings

The two mainstays of the U.S. capacity to issue warnings are the Emergency Alert System (EAS), which relies primarily on broadcasting media, and the NOAA Weather Radio All-Hazards Network. The National Weather Service (NWS) of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)¹ sends alerts through NOAA Weather Radio (NWR), now expanded to include warnings for all hazards. Several initiatives are underway within the federal government to improve, expand, and integrate existing warning systems. The most important of these — in terms of using, testing and developing leading-edge technology — is the Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS), a public-private partnership in which the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has a leadership role. Many communities, meanwhile, are installing local alert systems that send voice, text messages, and e-mail. Many agree that the long-term goal for emergency alerts is to converge federal warning systems into an integrated network that can interface with localized warning systems and also call centers, such as those used for 911 and 211 calls.²

As will be discussed in this report, the Emergency Alert System relies on many partners. The role of the federal government has been to lead by reason of its prime responsibility to assure presidential alerts for national disasters. Alerts and warnings at the state and local level are disseminated through a number of information channels; the broadcasting of these alerts by television and radio stations is voluntary. The National Response Framework emphasizes the separate roles of state and local agencies and other non-federal entities in disseminating alerts.³ The differentiation between responsibilities to be assumed by federal agencies and those of state/tribal/local authorities has in many cases led to problems with coordination, and uneven effectiveness, of EAS utilization from state to state. This differentiation has produced an apparent obstruction to the implementation of a new program that would transmit alerts over cell phones.

In response to a requirement in the Warning, Alert, and Response Network Act, or WARN Act, as signed into law (Title VI of P.L. 109-347), the Federal

¹ The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) is an agency of the Department of Commerce.

² 911 calls go to Public Safety Answering Points (PSAPs). 211 calls typically go to municipal call centers. The role of call centers in providing warnings and information in emergencies is discussed in CRS Report RL32939, *An Emergency Communications Safety Net: Integrating 911 and Other Services*, by Linda K. Moore.

³ “Federal planning for external affairs functions recognizes State, tribal, and local responsibilities for providing information to their citizens.” National Response Framework, National Response Plan, Emergency Support Function #15 - External Affairs Annex at [<http://www.fema.gov/pdf/emergency/nrf/nrf-esf-15.pdf>]. Viewed May 2, 2008.

Communications Commission (FCC) worked with commercial mobile service providers to create a Commercial Mobile Alert System (CMAS) that would be able to relay alerts through cell phones. In addition to presidential alerts, which clearly are a federal responsibility, the service would transmit emergency alerts generated by state, local, and other non-federal authorities. FEMA, which is the lead agency for EAS, has stated that it does not have the authority to manage services deemed necessary for the successful operation of CMAS. Implementation of CMAS is in abeyance until a federal agency can be identified to take on the role of receiving, verifying, and transmitting non-federal alerts to cell phone operators. Legislation may be required to resolve this impasse. (Additional information in this report under “Legislation in the 109th Congress: The WARN Act.”)

EAS Administration

EAS currently sends emergency messages with the cooperation of broadcast radio and television and most cable television stations. It originated as CONELRAD (Control of Electromagnetic Radiation) in 1951, as part of America’s response to the threat of nuclear attack. In 1963, the system was opened to state and local participation. Through most of its existence, the alert system was known as the Emergency Broadcast System. The name was changed when the technology was upgraded and automated during the 1990’s.

Congress has placed responsibility for civil defense measures, which include operation of the present-day EAS at the national level, with the Director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)⁴ now part of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). The FCC has been designated by FEMA to manage broadcaster involvement in EAS; it currently provides technical standards and support for EAS, rules for its operation, and enforcement within the broadcasting and cable industries. Non-federal EAS operational plans are developed primarily at the state and local level. The emergency response officials who, typically, initiate an EAS message for a state or local emergency also work with FEMA. The FCC requires states that have developed an EAS plan to file the plans with the FCC. Not all states have FCC-compliant EAS plans that have been approved and reviewed by the FCC. FEMA advisors often help to integrate EAS usage into regional or state emergency response plans. The decentralized process of EAS coordination and implementation contributes to uneven planning; for example, procedures for initiating a message and activating EAS differ from state to state.

Umbrella organizations that participate in EAS planning and administration include the Media Security and Reliability Council (an FCC Advisory Committee), the Primary Entry Point⁵ Advisory Committee, and associations such as the National

⁴ P.L. 103-337, National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1995, Title XXXIV - Civil Defense, Sec. 603 (42 U.S.C. § 5196), amending the Federal Civil Defense Act of 1950 (64 Stat 1245). Provisions are now embodied in the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (42 U.S.C. 5121 and seq.).

⁵ The Primary Entry Point (PEP) system consists of a nationwide network of broadcast stations connected with government activation points through designated National Primary
(continued...)

Association of Broadcasters, the National Alliance of State Broadcasters Associations, and individual state broadcasting associations. States and localities organize Emergency Communications Committees whose members often include representatives from broadcasting companies or local TV and radio stations. These committees agree on the chain-of-command and other procedures for activating an emergency message through radio and television. The constraints of current EAS technology, as specified by the FCC, limit a state or local EAS message to no more than two minutes. Emergency alert agreements with broadcasters, therefore, usually provide for both EAS warning messages and follow-up broadcast programming.

Broadcaster Participation. The participation of broadcast and cable stations in state and local emergency announcements is voluntary. Over 30 radio stations have been designated as National Primary Stations that are required to transmit Presidentially initiated alerts and messages. The National Primary Stations form the backbone of the federal-level Emergency Alert System, and are directly under the governance of FEMA. In times of a national emergency, their broadcasts would be relayed by Primary Entry Point (PEP) stations to radio and television stations that rebroadcast the message to other broadcast and cable stations until all stations have been alerted. This system of relaying EAS messages is generally referred to as the “daisy chain.” State and local emergency alerts enter the daisy chain through the PEPs, which can include the national primary stations (also referred to as Presidential PEPs). The FCC requires the states to initiate weekly or monthly tests, it does not require testing at the national level. There are therefore several levels of governance, each of which uses different combinations of radio broadcast stations to initiate and transmit messages. There is a federal level, for national alerts, administered by FEMA, using radio broadcast stations with equipment that conforms to FCC requirements, there are state plans, as described above, and there can be local plans. States, in particular, will use combinations of radio stations with different broadcast transmission coverage to match the configuration of their geographical areas. One constant is that the FCC sets the requirements for equipment for all stations.

The FCC requires broadcast and cable stations to install FCC-certified EAS equipment as a condition of licensing. Radio and television broadcast stations, cable companies and wireless cable companies must participate. Cable companies serving communities of less than 5,000 may be partially exempted from EAS requirements. For the broadcast of non-federal emergency messages, the FCC has ruled that the broadcasters, not a state or local authority, have the final authority to transmit a message.⁶ Historically, the level of cooperation from the broadcasting industry has been high. For example, because state and local governments are not required to upgrade to EAS-compatible equipment — and therefore may lack direct access to the technology — broadcasters often volunteer to manage the task of EAS message initiation.

⁵ (...continued)
Stations (LP1s).

⁶ FCC, *Report and Order and Further Notice of Proposed Rule Making*, Released December 9, 1994, FO Docket Nos. 91-301 and 91-171, 10 *FCC Record* 1786.

Digital Broadcasting. The FCC has promulgated new rules to include digital media carriage of EAS messages. In a Report and Order released November 10, 2005, EAS requirements have been expanded to include digital communications over direct-broadcast television and radio, digital cable, and direct-to-home satellite television and radio. Companies using these media are required to install EAS equipment to handle digital formats. As part of the Report and Order, the FCC asked for a new round of comments on ways to improve and expand the current emergency alert system.⁷ The final rule became effective February 21, 2006.

EAS Technology. EAS technology uses coders and decoders to send data signals recognized as emergency messages. In manual mode, an EAS alert is sent to a broadcaster, either over an EAS encoder-decoder or by other means, such as a telephone call. Where agreements have been put in place with broadcasters, EAS messages can be created and activated by state or local officials and transmitted automatically to the public without the intervention of broadcasting staff. These automated messages are broadcast to the public using computer-generated voices. All EAS messages carry a unique code which can be matched to codes embedded in transmitting equipment; this authenticates the sender of the EAS message. To facilitate the transmittal of emergency messages, messages are classified by types of events, which also are coded. These event codes speed the recognition and re-transmittal process at broadcast stations. For example, a tornado warning is TOR, evacuation immediate is EVI, a civil emergency message is CEM. When a message is received at the broadcast station, it can be relayed to the public either as a program interruption or, for television, as a “crawl” at the bottom of the TV screen.

Alerting Individuals with Disabilities and Others with Special Needs. The FCC requires that EAS messages be delivered in both audio and visual (captions, message boards, other) formats. Regular broadcasts about emergencies, however, do not have to comply with this requirement. The community of disabled individuals, therefore, is often under-served when emergency information is disseminated outside the EAS network. Although a number of technologies exist to provide accessible formats for people with special needs — such as those with disabilities, the elderly, and those who do not understand English — many of these solutions are not supported by the current EAS system or are so expensive as to be inaccessible to most. Incorporating technologies that expand the reach of EAS, at a reasonable cost, is one of the challenges of delivering an effective warning system that is truly nationwide.⁸

GAO Study. Many aspects of the Emergency Alert System summarized in this report are discussed in detail in a March 2007 report from the Government Accountability Office (GAO).⁹ The GAO initiated a study of the functioning of EAS

⁷ FCC, *Review of the Emergency Alert System, First Report and Order and Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking*, EB Docket No. 04-296, released November 10, 2005.

⁸ For a discussion of the issue in the context of the Americans with Disabilities Act, see CRS Report RS22254, *The Americans with Disabilities Act and Emergency Preparedness and Response*, by Nancy Lee Jones.

⁹ *Emergency Preparedness: Current Emergency Alert System Has Limitations, and* (continued...)

from the perspective of emergency preparedness in government operations. Based on its findings, the GAO has made recommendations to FEMA and the FCC for additional planning and greater involvement with stakeholders. In particular, the GAO found that there were problems in the relay system that had not been identified, in part because there is no requirement for a system test at the national level. It also identified problems such as gaps in disaster planning and insufficient redundancy to ensure uninterrupted broadcasting nationwide. DHS replied positively to the GAO's report and recommendations and said that it would begin quarterly tests of the national-level relay.¹⁰ The reply also noted that FEMA, in coordination with the FCC, continues to work on implementing the executive order regarding improvements to the system.

NOAA Weather Radio

Digitized signal technology for EAS is the same as that used for the NOAA Weather Radio (NWR). Widely recognized as the backbone of public warning systems, NWR broadcasts National Weather Service forecasts and all-hazard warnings for natural and man-made events. The compatibility of the signals makes it possible for EAS equipment used by the media to receive and decode NWR messages automatically. Weather radios can be tuned directly to NWR channels. Many can be programmed to receive only specific types of messages — for example, civil emergency — and for specific locations, using Specific Area Message Encoding (SAME). Standardized SAME codes can be used in almost any device with a radio receiver. These can sound an alarm or set off a flashing light. Similar technology is available to provide NWR messages by satellite TV and over the Internet as messages or as e-mail. Therefore, although EAS and NWR are broadcast technologies set up to operate on a one-to-many basis, these broadcasts can be screened and decoded to provide customized alerts.

All-Hazard Warning Technology

Given the advanced state of other communications technologies, especially the Internet and wireless devices, the reliance on delivering EAS warnings by radio and television broadcasting seems out-of-date. Some states and communities are pioneering alert systems that utilize other infrastructures. In particular, many communities participate in programs with e-mail or Internet alerts and some issue mass alerts by telephone.

Common Alerting Protocol. A standardized format known as Common Alerting Protocol (CAP)¹¹ has been developed for use in all types of alert messages. CAP has received widespread support from the public safety community and has been accepted as a standard by the international Organization for the Advancement

⁹ (...continued)

Development of a New Integrated System Will Be Challenging, GAO-07-411, March 2007.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Appendix III.

¹¹ CAP information at [http://www.incident.com/cookbook/index.php/CAP_Fact_Sheet]. Viewed May 2, 2008.

of Structured Information Standards (OASIS). One of its key benefits is that it can be used as a single input to activate multiple warning systems. It is being used as a standard for new, digitized alert networks using multiple technologies. The Emergency Interoperability Consortium (EIC) has a memorandum of understanding with DHS to improve and expand the use of CAP and other XML standards in emergency alerts.¹²

Call Centers. Some of the technological solutions for disseminating alerts and providing information rely on call centers, including 911 emergency call centers (also referred to as Public Safety Answering Points, or PSAPs). *The 9/11 Commission Report*¹³ describes the often inadequate response of 911 call centers serving New York City.¹⁴ The report's analysis of the 911 response recommends: "In planning for future disasters, it is important to integrate those taking 911 calls into the emergency response team and to involve them in providing up-to-date information and assistance to the public."¹⁵ Such a solution would require a common infrastructure that would support a number of communications and warning needs. Many recommendations have encouraged the development of greater end-to-end connectivity among all types of emergency services.

Department of Homeland Security. In June 2004, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the Department of Homeland Security's Information Analysis and Infrastructure Protection Directorate signed an agreement that allows DHS to send critical all-hazards alerts and warnings, including those related to terrorism, directly through the NOAA Weather Radio All-Hazards Network. Under the agreement, operational procedures were established to develop warning and alert messages that will be sent to NWR for broadcast to radios and other communications devices equipped with SAME technology and for entry into EAS.

Digital Emergency Alert System. Working with the Association of Public Television Stations, DHS has completed two successful pilots to test the implementation of digital technologies and networks, the Digital Emergency Alert System (DEAS). DEAS uses the additional capacity that digital technology provides for broadcasting to send digitized alerts to almost any communications device, including wireless. The rollout of DEAS is part of the Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS). Development of IPAWS is under the leadership of FEMA's National Continuity Programs Directorate.¹⁶ It will use digital media — including digital TV — to send emergency alert data over telephone, cable, wireless

¹² See [<http://www.eic.org/dhs.htm>] and [<http://www.eic.org/docs/SIGNED%20MOA.pdf>]. Both viewed May 2, 2008.

¹³ Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, Official Government Edition, 2004 (referred to as *9/11 Commission Report*).

¹⁴ *9/11 Commission Report* pp. 286-287, 295, and 306.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 318.

¹⁶ See [<http://www.fema.gov/about/offices/ncp/index.shtm>]. Viewed May 2, 2008.

devices, broadcast media and other networks. The program will provide the base for a national federal public safety alert and warning system using digital technology.¹⁷

Another joint program under the IPAWS umbrella is a pilot with NOAA to test a geo-targeted alert system using “reverse 911.” Reverse 911 is a term sometime used to describe any calling system that places calls generated by a public safety call center to a specific audience.

A program component of IPAWS is to improve the robustness of the communications network to Primary Entry Point (PEP) radio stations by switching from dial-up to satellite distribution. The number of PEP broadcast stations is to be expanded to provide satellite communications capability to every state and territory. These steps are meant to assure the survivability of radio broadcast communications in the event of a catastrophic incident. The public radio satellite system is already equipped to send DEAS messages to about 860 public radio stations across the country. FEMA plans to increase the number, over time, from 34 to 63.¹⁸

Proposals and Programs

Advocates of all-hazard warning systems are seeking interoperability among warning systems, standardized terminology, and operating procedures in order to provide emergency alerts and information that reach the right people, in a timely manner, in a way that is meaningful and understood by all. In 1999, FEMA and the Departments of Commerce and Agriculture took the lead in a multi-agency working group to explore ways to create an all-hazard warning network.¹⁹ Their recommendations included using NWR as the backbone for a national all-hazard warning system and the establishment of a permanent group to promote improvements in warning systems. The following year, the National Science and Technology Council at the White House sponsored a report that explored the types of technologies and systems that are used or could be used for emergency alerts.²⁰ Among its recommendations were: the creation of a public-private partnership that would bring all stakeholders together; one or more working groups to address issues such as terminology, technology, location-specific identifiers and cost-effective warning systems; system standardization; and increasing the number of communications channels for warnings. The report concluded that substantial

¹⁷ Testimony of R. David Paulison, Administrator, FEMA, Department of Homeland Security, Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs, April 3, 2008.

¹⁸ Remarks by General Martha Rainville, Assistant Administrator, National Continuity Programs Directorate, FEMA, Department of Homeland Security, at 2008 EAS National Summit, National Alliance of State Broadcasters Association, Washington, DC, February 25, 2008.

¹⁹ National Partnership for Reinventing Government, “Saving Lives with an All-Hazard Warning Network,” 1999, at [<http://www.nws.noaa.gov/om/all-haz/all-haz1.htm>]. Viewed May 2, 2008.

²⁰ National Science and Technology Council, Working Group on Natural Disaster Information Systems, Subcommittee on Natural Disaster Reduction, “Effective Disaster Warnings,” November 2000 [http://www.sdr.gov/NDIS_rev_Oct27.pdf]. Viewed May 2, 2008.

improvements in early warning systems could be achieved through coordination and better use of existing technologies.

Also in 2000, a public-private, multi-disciplinary group was organized as the Partnership for Public Warning (PPW). In 2002, the group received funding²¹ to convene meetings and prepare comments regarding the Homeland Security Advisory System (HSAS). Workshop findings were later expanded into recommendations in “A National Strategy for Integrated Public Warning Policy and Capability.” The purpose of the document was to “develop a national vision and goals” for improving all-hazard warning systems at the federal, state and local levels. PPW suggested that DHS take the lead in developing a national public warning capability. The PPW discussed the role of an alert system in public safety and homeland security and concluded that current procedures are “ineffective.” PPW’s recommendations centered on developing multiple, redundant systems using various technologies with common standards that would be “backward compatible” with EAS (including Amber Alert codes) and National Weather Service technologies.²² It subsequently scaled back its activities for lack of funding.²³

Executive Order: Public Alert and Warning System

On June 26, 2006, President George W. Bush issued an executive order stating that U.S. policy is “to have an effective, reliable, integrated, flexible, and comprehensive system to alert and warn the American people. . . .” To achieve this policy, the President set out a list of functional requirements for the Secretary of Homeland Security to meet that respond to the recommendations of experts in this field. In summary, these requirements cover

- evaluating existing resources;
- adopting common protocols, standards and other procedures to enable interoperability;
- delivering alerts on criteria such as location or risk;
- accommodating disabilities and language needs;
- supporting necessary communications facilities;
- conducting training, testing, and exercises;
- ensuring public education about emergency warnings;
- coordinating and cooperating with the private sector and government at all levels;
- administering the existing Emergency Alert System as a component of the broader system;
- ensuring that the President can alert and warn the American people.

²¹ Funding came from FEMA, the National Science Foundation, the National Weather Service, the U.S. Geological Survey, and private sources.

²² Documents at [<http://www.partnershipforpublicwarning.org/ppw/natlstratsumm.html>]. Viewed May 1, 2008.

²³ Memorandum to PPW Members, June 30, 2004. The PPW website is maintained by MITRE Corporation.

The order also specified the level of support expected from other departments and agencies in meeting the requirements for a better warning system. The Secretary of Homeland Security was ordered to “ensure an orderly and effective transition” from current capabilities to the system described by executive order.²⁴

Legislation in the 109th Congress: The WARN Act

Although the 109th Congress introduced a number of bills that proposed ways to improve the emergency alert system, the language that made it into law as Title VI of the port security bill (the Security and Accountability for Every Port Act, SAFE Port Act, H.R. 4954, Representative Lungren) focused almost exclusively on developing regulations and technology that could effectively send geo-targeted alerts to commercial cell phones.

The Warning, Alert, and Response Network Act (WARN Act) as signed into law as Title VI of P.L. 109-347, required the establishment of a Commercial Mobile Service Alert Advisory Committee by the FCC.²⁵ Following the signing of the act into law, the FCC assembled the committee, as required, with members from state, local and tribal governments, from industry and associations, and representatives of persons with special needs.²⁶ This committee, within a year of formation, was charged with providing the FCC with recommendations on technical requirements, standards, regulation and other matters needed to support the transmittal of emergency alerts by commercial mobile service providers to their subscribers.²⁷ The FCC, alone or in consultation with the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) of the Department of Commerce, was given the responsibility of adopting proceedings to be used in the promulgation and enforcement of rules reflecting the conclusions of the committee.²⁸ The digital broadcasting capacity of public television stations, described above, is to be used to “enable the distribution of geographically targeted alerts by commercial mobile service providers,” based on recommendations from the committee.²⁹ These provisions are to assure the development of a new national warning system at the federal level, for presidential alerts, and will support development of alerts to commercial mobile devices. The WARN Act also included provisions for commercial wireless service providers to opt in or out of the emergency alert service, with requirements for informing consumers.³⁰

²⁴ “Executive Order: Public Alert and Warning System,” released June 26, 2006, available at [<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/06/20060626.html>]. Executive Order 13407. Viewed May 2, 2008.

²⁵ P.L. 109-347, Sec. 603 (a).

²⁶ P.L. 109-347, Sec. 603 (b). Information about committee activities and membership is at [<http://www.fcc.gov/pshs/advisory/cmsaac/>]. Viewed May 2, 2008.

²⁷ P.L. 109-347, Sec. 603 (c).

²⁸ P.L. 109-347, Sec. 602 (a).

²⁹ P.L. 109-347, Sec. 602 (c).

³⁰ P.L. 109-347, Sec. 602 (b).

Programs specified in the law may be funded from the \$106 million made available through the Digital Transition and Public Safety Fund established in the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 (P.L. 109-171). The WARN Act authorized the advancing of these funds effective October 1, 2006.³¹ One of the purposes of the fund is to reimburse broadcast stations for reasonable costs incurred in complying with requirements for alerts under the program as established by the committee.³² These monies and other appropriations could be used to provide up to \$10 million for grants to communities that are unserved or underserved by commercial mobile services, to acquire “outdoor alerting technologies.”³³ Funds also could be used to pay for a research and development program, established under the act, to support the development of technologies that can be used to expand the reach of alerts to commercial mobile devices. The program is to be headed by the Homeland Security Under Secretary for Science and Technology, in consultation with NIST and the FCC.³⁴

Commercial Mobile Service Alert Advisory Committee. The committee submitted recommendations on using commercial cell phone technology for emergency alerts within the time frame required by Congress (i.e., by October 12, 2007). In accordance with provisions in the WARN Act, the FCC completed a proceeding reviewing the recommendations made by the Commercial Mobile Service Alert Advisory Committee (CMSAAC) within 180 days of receiving the recommendations.³⁵

Commercial Mobile Alert System. The proposal to develop a Commercial Mobile Alert System (CMAS) and other recommendations made by the CMSAAC were opened to public comment by the FCC on December 14, 2007.³⁶ In the subsequent rule-making,³⁷ the FCC adopted most of the recommendations made by the CMSAAC. In addition to message formats and other standards, some of the key rules cover

- Type of alerts. Three alert categories, as defined in the Report and Order, are required to be carried by participating carriers: presidential, imminent threat, and AMBER alerts.
- Coverage of alerts. The standard for location coverage is to be county-wide.
- Management of alerts. The CMSAAC recommended that a federal agency act as an aggregator in accepting, verifying, and routing messages.

³¹ P.L. 109-347, Sec. 606 (c).

³² P.L. 109-347, Sec. 606 (b).

³³ P.L. 109-347, Sec. 605.

³⁴ P.L. 109-347, Sec. 604.

³⁵ P.L. 109-347, Sec. 602 (a).

³⁶ FCC, *Notice of Proposed Rulemaking*, December 14, 2007, PS Docket No. 07-287.

³⁷ FCC, *First Report and Order*, April 9, 2008, PS Docket No. 07-287 (FCC 08-99).

The choice of aggregator has been deferred, due in part to concerns raised by FEMA regarding jurisdiction. Consequently, the Report and Order will not take effect until after a federal agency has been designated to receive and transmit alerts to participating wireless carriers. The WARN Act did not provide a mandatory deadline for the implementation of CMAS. There are also no provisions in the act that foresee the need for ongoing, active participation by a federal agency.

Authority for Disseminating State and Local Alerts. In its notice of proposed rule-making for the Commercial Mobile Alert Service, the FCC specifically inquired about the choice of a federal agency to take on the duties of aggregator, as recommended by the CMSAAC. During the course of committee discussions, FEMA reportedly had supported the proposal for a federal agency to manage the mobile alerts, leaving the impression that this responsibility would be assumed by FEMA.³⁸ In an official letter to the FCC, however, FEMA stated its position that the agency does not have the statutory authority to transmit alerts originated by state and local authorities.³⁹ The letter states that “statutes may need to be enacted in order for any Federal agency to have appropriate authority regarding the Aggregator and Gateway functions . . . “ and requests that the FCC not identify a responsible federal entity until “all legal issues have been identified and resolved.”

Legislation in the 110th Congress

The First Response Broadcasters Act of 2007 (S. 1223, Senator Landrieu and H.R. 2331, Representative Melancon) would authorize funds to strengthen the radio broadcasting infrastructure that supports the Emergency Alert System. To improve emergency broadcast coverage, the bills would require new Primary Entry Point stations in 21 states, the District of Columbia, and three territories. The bills define a Primary Entry Point as “a radio broadcast station designated to provide public information following national and local emergencies where there is no commercial power,” and would authorize \$6.5 million to construct and equip 25 Primary Entry Point stations.

The bills would also provide for a pilot Broadcast Disaster Preparedness Grant Program. They would require the Secretary of Homeland Security to set up a grant program for qualified first response broadcasters, defined in the bills as “a local or regional television or radio broadcaster that provides essential disaster-related public information programming before, during, and after the occurrence of a major disaster.” The purpose of the program is to protect or provide redundancy to facilities and equipment critical to transmitting disaster-related programming and to upgrade or add facilities needed for the preparation and transmission of this

³⁸ See “Statement of Commissioner Michael J. Copps,” FCC, *First Report and Order*, April 9, 2008, PS Docket No. 07-287 (FCC 08-99). Other committee members have made similar statements to CRS.

³⁹ Letter the FCC, dated February 19, 2008, from General Martha Rainville, Assistant Administrator, Office of National Continuity Programs, FEMA, Docket No. 07-287, at [http://fjallfoss.fcc.gov/prod/ecfs/retrieve.cgi?native_or_pdf=pdf&id_document=6519842449]. Viewed May 2, 2008.

programming. The bills would authorize \$10 million for each fiscal year from 2008 through 2010. By creating the category of first response broadcaster, the bills would address the rights of broadcasters to gain access to disaster sites and to receive assistance and support. In evaluating grant applicants, priority would be given to applications (1) made jointly by more than one broadcaster in an area, (2) that included cooperation with state or local authorities, (3) on behalf of broadcasters with no more than 50 employees, (4) by broadcasters principally owned and operated by area residents, and (5) that provided written statements of intent to provide disaster-related programming.

CJ's Home Protection Act of 2007⁴⁰ (H.R. 2787, Representative Ellsworth) takes a look at the devastation and damages caused by tornados, and the especially high risk to manufactured (mobile) homes. The findings of the bill cite a 2006 statistic from NOAA that indicates that over 40% of fatalities resulting from tornados were residents of mobile homes. CJ's Law would require that the installation of weather radios, equipped with SAME technology and tone alarms, be made a federal construction and safety standard for new manufactured homes intended for sale. The bill, as amended, was passed by the House on October 30, 2007, and sent to the Senate. It was referred to the Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs. No comparable bill has been introduced by the Senate.

⁴⁰ C.J. Martin, aged two, was killed when a tornado struck the Eastbrook Mobile Home Park in Evansville, Indiana, shortly after 2:00 a.m. on November 6, 2005.