

BLOGEMD: EMS Keeps Up With The Times

Local News

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Most of you are familiar with the Emergency Alert System (EAS). It is the system that Washington State broadcasters and cable systems use to transmit emergency information to the public in times of crisis. Led by the State Emergency Communications Committee (SECC), the effectiveness of EAS has relied on close cooperation between the state's radio and television stations, and local and state emergency management organizations since the eruption of Mount St. Helens in 1980.

That's more than 30 years, but in the past year, the SECC and Washington's EAS has seen more than its share of new developments, some a cause for concern. While emergency managers and broadcasters run weekly tests to ensure EAS equipment and activation protocols work, sometimes we learn lessons outside the usual testing: For instance, we recently learned that some broadcasters hadn't changed the default password for their EAS equipment. As a result, EAS equipment was hacked and listeners rattled by a hoax in the form of an emergency message warning about a Zombie attack in Montana. In another instance, the trailer for a new motion picture included the EAS activation tones, a violation of Federal Communications Commission (FCC) rules. Once broadcasters passed this message to the movie production company, it took steps to revise the trailer. These examples served as wake-up calls for those of us who broadcast emergency messages—EAS security has to be a priority and maintaining the public's trust in the system requires constant vigilance.

Keeping abreast of new technology is another concern. The SECC is in the process of updating the State EAS Plan to reflect improvements in EAS message delivery technology. Working with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the FCC adopted an Internet-based Common Alerting Protocol (CAP) for EAS messages. Under this system, broadcasters' EAS equipment continually polls CAP servers at the state and FEMA for messages to disseminate.

Washington's legacy delivery system, which uses the Washington State Patrol's microwave relay system, remains in place in order to provide robustness and redundancy in delivering EAS messages.

In addition to incorporating new technology, EAS may need the help of state lawmakers to enhance broadcasters' and cable systems' ability to perform critical work during an emergency. Legislation enacted in Illinois and Nevada provides broadcast engineers and workers with special access to remote transmitter sites. This will allow them to maintain and repair key equipment, thus keeping critical broadcast stations and cable systems operational during and after a disaster. The same legislation also prioritizes fueling broadcast facilities' backup generators during a disaster so transmitters can stay on the air to deliver life-and-property-saving information.

Another two developments that compliment EAS are worth noting: Wireless Emergency Alerts (WEA), a project initiated by the cellular industry and FCC, will deliver emergency messages directly to individual cell phones. It is coming online now. Broadcasters are working with carriers to produce

cell phones with FM receiver chips installed and activated. This will further enhance emergency messaging via local FM radio stations when cellular systems are overwhelmed. Washington's EAS continues to evolve. It is a dynamic tool and each new wrinkle helps emergency management agencies, broadcasters and cable systems do a better job collectively of delivering life and property saving information in times of disaster.

The eruption of Mount St. Helens launched a new era of cooperation between broadcasters and emergency managers in Washington. It's been three decades and we continue to enjoy an outstanding symbiotic relationship of mutual support and respect. Our residents are safer because of it. Not every state can say that.

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