

**STATEMENT OF
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SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, PUBLIC BUILDINGS, AND
EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT
HEARING ON “ASSURING PUBLIC ALERT SYSTEMS WORK TO WARN AMERICAN CITIZENS OF
NATURAL AND TERRORIST DISASTERS”
JUNE 4, 2008**

I am pleased that the Subcommittee is holding this important hearing on upgrading the nation’s system of public alerts and warnings, and I commend Chair Norton for her leadership in probing this important issue.

June 1st marked the beginning of the 2008 hurricane season. The first named storm of the season, Tropical Storm Arthur, moved slowly across the Yucatan last Friday. Luckily, our hurricane-prone states were spared, but we know more storms will come. In 2008, we have already had 29 disasters declared by the President and four emergencies, including severe storms, tornados, and wild fires.

To help keep millions of Americans out of harm’s way in the event of a natural or man-made disaster, our nation relies on an emergency communications system that has been in existence since the 1950’s, although it has received some upgrades over time. The current national Emergency Alert System (“EAS”) is complex, and involves several Federal entities.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (“FEMA”) is responsible for administering EAS. FEMA has designated the Federal Communications Commission (“FCC”) to manage the broadcast media, including radio, cable television stations and satellite radio operators, who are required to participate in national-level EAS alerts. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s (“NOAA”) National Weather Service administers the All-Hazards National Weather Radio (“NWR”) alert and warnings program. Currently, 90 percent of all messages and 100 percent of all Federal messages disseminated by the EAS are generated by NOAA weather alerts.

State and local governments may use EAS on an as-available basis, but participation is voluntary. The process of EAS coordination at the state or regional level is highly decentralized and has led to a system in which, for example, procedures for initiating a broadcast message and activating the system differ from state to state. Fortunately, there has never been a national level disaster alert issued by the President.

In recent years, the Federal Government has elevated the importance of providing the nation with a modern, reliable, integrated, and comprehensive public alert and warning system that can reach the American people, across the nation, at any time. Unfortunately, we do not fully have that capability today. Executive Order 13407, issued by President Bush in June 2006, specifically called for the modernization of the EAS system.

In response, FEMA created the Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (“IPAWS”) to develop and implement the next generation alerts and warnings communication system. In today’s world, Americans no longer rely on just the television or radio to receive news and information. In order for IPAWS to be successful, the existing EAS framework must be upgraded and the network must be expanded to include more modern technologies including cell phone, pagers, the internet, and other wireless devices.

Modernizing and integrating the public alerts and warning system is an extremely large and complicated task. At the commencement of the IPAWS program, FEMA outlined a vision of an integrated alert and warning system that would be effective, available at all times and under any conditions, and available through various media devices. FEMA initiated several pilot projects aimed at furthering those goals, including upgrading the digital capabilities of public radio and television, providing more geographically-targeted alerting capabilities, and upgrading and expanding the relay distribution system. The 14 pilot programs have concluded and many stakeholders fear that FEMA does not have a clear plan of how IPAWS intends to function in the future. Several questions remain unanswered, including the lack of a clear articulation of the intermediate goals of IPAWS, the timeline for full-scale implementation of the system, and perhaps, most importantly, what an upgraded, integrated system will look like and how FEMA intends to achieve it.

Clearly, the Federal Government can not operate in a vacuum. State, local, and tribal governments and the private sector have specific roles and responsibilities in disseminating alerts and they must work together. We can not afford to allow a haphazard and uneven version of EAS implemented across the country. Because FEMA has not yet come forward with a well-articulated plan for IPAWS, some states and localities have felt the need to upgrade their alert systems on their own. A national, integrated system is needed because a patchwork of equipment and systems operating around the country may or may not be interoperable. We have been there before and remember the problems and tragic consequences that equipment, which proved to not be interoperable, caused during 9/11.

We recognize the progress that has been made in modernizing and integrating the EAS system, but underscore that some major challenges remain, including reaching an agreement on standard technology for disseminating alerts, working with EAS stakeholders to gain collaboration so all systems can work effectively together, and providing training for EAS participants.

I look forward to hearing from Major General Rainville today on the status of the IPAWS Program, and expect that FEMA will present the Subcommittee with a clear plan for how the agency plans to modernize and implement the nation's next generation

public communication and warning system. Congress and this Committee stand ready to assist FEMA in those efforts.

Finally, I would like to recognize Ranking Member Graves and Chair Norton for introducing H.R. 6038, the “Integrated Public Alerts and Warning Systems Modernization Act of 2008,” a bill which directs the President to modernize the integrated public alerts system and includes a requirement to produce a detailed implementation plan that includes a timeline and spending plan.

I welcome the witnesses and I look forward to hearing their testimony.