

Communicating With The Public Before/During/After An Emergency (Draft)

I. Introduction

The Panel recognizes the importance of ensuring that the nation has a comprehensive emergency alert system that allows officials at the national, state, and local level to contact and inform the public in the most effective and efficient manner possible.

To this end, the Panel received oral and written testimony regarding efforts to communicate information to members of the public in connection with last year's hurricanes, including pre-storm evacuation information as well as post-storm recovery and relief information. The Panel received testimony from public officials as well as from traditional providers of emergency information to the public (such as radio and television broadcasters) and newer technologies that offer additional means of alerting the public (such as telephone, Internet services and time-sensitive notification systems).

The Panel offers several specific recommendations for actions that the Commission can take to facilitate improved emergency communications. These recommendations relate not only to the Emergency Alert System ("EAS"), which is the nation's principal tool for providing information to the public in emergency situations, but also to other means by which national, state and local officials can reach affected citizens prior to, during, and in the aftermath of emergency situations.

The findings concerning the communications issues faced before, during and after Hurricane Katrina indicate that effective and efficient public outreach in emergency situations requires a multi-pronged approach that, of necessity, entails a set of complementary technologies, systems and networks; no single technology or approach is able to accomplish this mission alone.

II. Recommendations

1. The FCC should help educate state and local officials about the existing Emergency Alert System (EAS), its benefits, and how it can be best utilized.
2. The FCC should develop programs for educating the public about the EAS and promote community awareness of potential mechanisms for accessing those alerts sent during power outages or broadcast transmission failures.
3. The FCC should quickly find a mechanism to resolve any technical hurdles in the current EAS to ensure that non-English speaking people or persons with disabilities have equal access to public warnings.

4. The FCC should move expeditiously to explore the expansion of EAS to other technologies.
5. Consistent with recent legislation, the FCC should work with Congress on a comprehensive public warning system that complements existing systems and allows local officials to increase the penetration of warnings to the public as well as target, when necessary, the alerts to a particular geographic area.
6. The FCC should work with the Department of Homeland Security and other Federal agencies on pilot projects that would allow the more immediate deployment and evaluation of new notification technologies.