

THE EMERGENCY ALERT SYSTEM (EAS)

FCC Consumer Facts

History

This is a test of the Emergency Alert System – this is only a test...”

You will occasionally hear or see these words on your local broadcast station, satellite radio, Direct Broadcast Satellite (DBS), or cable system.

The EAS is designed to provide the President with a means to address the American people in the event of a national emergency. Beginning in 1963, the President permitted state and local emergency information to be transmitted using the system. Since then, local emergency management personnel have used the EAS to relay local emergency messages via broadcast stations, cable, and wireless cable systems. In October 2005, the FCC expanded the EAS rules to require EAS participation by digital television (DTV) broadcasters, digital cable television providers, digital broadcast radio, Digital Audio Radio Service (DARS), and DBS systems. These rules take effect on December 31, 2006, except for the DBS rules, which take effect on May 31, 2007. While participation in national EAS alerts is mandatory for these providers, state and local EAS participation is currently voluntary.

The FCC and EAS

The FCC designed the EAS to be implemented through a cooperative arrangement among the FCC, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), now part of the Department of Homeland Security, the National Weather Service (NWS), and the states. Each plays an important role. The FCC provides information to broadcasters, cable system operators, and other EAS participants regarding the technical and operational requirements of the EAS. Additionally, the FCC ensures that state and local EAS plans conform to EAS requirements.

Other Organizations' Roles

FEMA provides direction and assistance for state and local emergency management officials to develop, implement, and maintain their EAS structure. The NWS provides emergency weather information to alert the public of dangerous local weather conditions and other emergencies. State and local plans for the activation of the EAS are created by the State Emergency Communications Committees (SECCs) and Local Emergency Communications Committees (LECCs), which are formed by government officials and representatives from the broadcast and cable industries.

EAS Communications

The EAS allows broadcast stations, satellite radio, cable systems, DBS systems, participating satellite companies, and other services to send and receive emergency information quickly and automatically, even if their facilities are unattended. The EAS was designed to ensure that if one link in the dissemination of alert information is broken, members of the public have multiple alternate sources of warning. EAS equipment also provides a method for automatic

interruption of regular programming, and is able to relay emergency messages in any language used by the EAS participant.

Along with its capability of providing a national message to the entire public simultaneously, the EAS structure provides authorized state and local personnel with a quick method to distribute important local emergency information. A state emergency manager may use the system to send out a public warning by broadcasting that warning from one or more major radio stations in a particular state. EAS equipment in other radio and television stations, as well as cable systems in that state, can automatically monitor and rebroadcast that message.

Additionally, EAS equipment can directly monitor the National Weather Service for local weather and other emergency alerts, which local broadcast stations, cable systems, and other EAS participants can then rebroadcast, providing an almost immediate relay of local emergency messages to the public.

The FCC's goal is to make EAS capable of disseminating emergency information as quickly as possible to the people who need it. Accordingly, the FCC currently is considering updating the EAS so that it can take full advantage of digital and other emerging communications technologies. In addition, the FCC is considering ways to ensure that EAS alerts reach all Americans, including those with hearing and vision disabilities and those who speak languages other than English.

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