



The

Broadcasters' Desktop Resource

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... edited by Barry Mishkind – the Eclectic Engineer

FEMA/EAS Virtual Roundtable Notes and Observations

June 9, 2011



By **Adrienne Abbott**

[June 2011] On June 9 2011, Manny Centeno chaired a roundtable that focused on the Emergency Alert System and the upcoming national EAN test in November.

The national test was only announced on Thursday, but raised a lot of questions. Adrienne Abbott not only was one of the panel participants, but she shares her notes on the roundtable.

I am not going to try to repeat everything that was said during the Virtual Roundtable conferences. They will be available for viewing on line in the next week or so.

However, there were a number of discussions that really stood out for me and those are noted here along with the reasons why.

From the beginning, moderator Manny Centeno steered the conversation in a positive and constructive mode. Early on it was noted that AMBER Alert and the recent NWS weather activations had saved lives so we know EAS works.

AS TO AUDIO QUALITY

It was during the discussion on audio quality that a statement from the National Association of Broadcasters representative Larry Walke showed that we might be our own biggest obstacle. Walke said that NAB was generally unaware of any concerns about the audio quality of EAS tests and activations - a statement that left some of us in stunned silence.

Folks, we have to do a better job of communicating in our own industry! I know this is a big issue, from engineers to program directors to general managers. Everyone has a concern or complaint about audio quality issues. But somewhere along the way, we have failed to tell our biggest professional organization – the one that represents us to our government officials – that EAS has an audio quality problem.

We have all tried to work with our state and local emergency managers and the National Weather Service on improving the audio quality, but the NAB does not think we have a problem because somewhere along the way we have not told them!

CABLE INPUT

The other big shocker came during the afternoon TV session when the representative of the Cable TV industry told us they actually liked the FCC's EAS Handbook - and found it helpful particularly because it gave simple, brief explanations and provided information about EAS logging requirements!

They also found that the directions were consistent from state to state and that was helpful to their industry.

While we were all recovering from that shock, the cable representative went on to give some useful and practical suggestions for improving the handbook by making it available online in an interactive format where someone could click on links in the text and get more information about a particular subject.

They also recommended that the online version automatically upgrade periodically in response to demands for specific information. Cloud, anyone?

MAKE YOURSELF HEARD

A consistent note throughout both sessions was the recommendation from Greg Cooke of the FCC that participants file comments on the Part 11 NPRM. Greg emphasized that the agency was looking for information from the industry and the people who actually make EAS work.

SOLVING THE AUDIO ISSUES

One of the most helpful comments came during the radio session discussion on technical issues and the need to properly set up and configure EAS equipment.

I think it was Jeff Smith who said that many issues of audio quality and reception could be resolved if engineers would treat the EAS equipment just like they would a satellite receiver or any other audio source: balance the audio, isolate the rf, use a good quality, outside

antenna that is properly polarized and make sure the receivers are properly tuned for the Monitoring Assignments.

After those initial steps, stations can then deal with whether they want to set the unit to Manual or Auto mode and program the proper event codes and locator codes. And someone needs to keep track of the batteries and change them at least every two years.

OUTREACH TO EMs & THE PUBLIC

There was a lot of discussion in both sessions about getting Emergency Managers involved in EAS.

Suzanne Goucher suggested that state broadcast associations put on splashy media events for the CAP deadline and invite state and local emergency managers to participate. This way they are put on the spot about their role in public warning and the use of the latest technologies to reach people.

Ann Arnold commented on her frustration in dealing with reluctant emergency managers and the need for FEMA to provide some kind of carrot-and-stick approach to public warning.

CAP IS COMING

Even though Manny made it clear in the radio session that CAP will not be part of the National Test, there are many broad-casters who cannot separate the two. That may be one more argument for postponing the CAP deadline.

Some of the most useful discussions to come out of the TV session concerned training issues, for both legacy EAS and the National Test as well as for CAP when it is in place. Broadcasters and Emergency Managers all need an easy, accessible on-line training program.

Suggestions were made on developing training webinars, Power Point programs that could be made available on line and making EAS training part of the National Incident Management

System curriculum at FEMA's Emergency Management Institute.

There were also suggestions that vendors do a better job with their documentation.

GETTING PEOPLE TO RESPOND

A side-bar discussion about Closed Circuit TV on the chat line caught my attention and is something that should be raised before the National Test.

Hospitality and tourism are major components of life in Nevada. While most people do not come here to sit in their hotel rooms, they do have the TV's on during their stay, so consideration needs to be given to the idea of getting EAS warnings into the various closed circuit TV systems.

We have all heard the stories about how people would not leave their slot machines during various disasters – I saw this myself during the Harvey's bombing back in 1980 and again at Harrah's in Reno during the 1997 New Year's

Floods – but they will leave hotel rooms when warnings are given!

REMINDER TO FILE COMMENTS

The discussions concluded with participants again being urged to file their own comments on the Part 11 NPRM and to do what they can to prepare for a successful National Test.

I have extensive notes about what we can do in the Nevada Op Area, starting with a mention of the National Test in our RMT's over the summer. I also plan more outreach with our state and local emergency managers and work with our engineers to make sure their EAS equipment is properly set up and programmed.

It is going to be a busy summer!

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