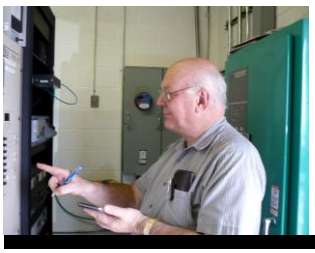

The
Broadcasters' Desktop Resource
www.theBDR.net ... edited by Barry Mishkind – the Eclectic Engineer

Planning for Problems

Avoiding Downtime When Disaster Strikes

[January 2010] What do you do when you cannot reach your transmitter site for an extended period of time? As this is written, most of the FM and TV broadcasters in Los Angeles are facing this situation. The stations that have planned ahead are the ones that stay on the air. The ones whose sole focus is to cut expenses are the ones that fail to serve their communities during emergency times.

There are many things that can knock a station off the air, no matter how careful the engineers are in building and maintaining a site. For example, a direct lightning hit will often create a major problem. A regional blackout can also leave a station without generator or battery backup deal in the water. Flooding can make access impossible with or without a boat for days.

Now what do you do?

Last year, Los Angeles suffered a major fire on Mt. Wilson, where most of the FM and TV transmitters are located for the market. The Forest Service (USFS) closed the highway to the site, and for days, the broadcasters had two choices: hope that their generators and/or auxiliary transmitters held up or that the one or two engineers left on the site might look in on their transmitters.

Even then, you may not be in the clear: The USFS itself was cited by air pollution officials after its generator ran for more than eight hours.

With the current rain/mud situation, the USFS has again shut down the access road, and it might be some time before operations return to normal.

DEAD AIR

Of course, during the fires, Murphy had his say, and some generators failed for one or another reason, and stations went dark. A few engineers tried to access the site, with fire-resistant clothes. Some got there, some were turned away.

A couple of stations lost their audio feed – and went dark.

Even with Internet streaming, a radio station whose carrier is lost is in a bad place – the bulk of its listeners are lost – sending a bad message to them: they are not a reliable source when people really need news and information.

PLANNING FOR SUCCESS

So what do you do?

PLAN AHEAD!!!!!!

You may not be in an area where fires or floods are major issues. You may not have to worry about earthquakes. Nevertheless, a strong look at how you get your programs on the air – and how you will get to the transmitter site in an emergency – deserves attention … and a plan.

Fortunately for most of the LA stations, the engineering departments had either foreseen the need, or scrambled and got some auxiliary sites put together, so they could keep operating, even if they lost the Mt. Wilson site. One wake-up call was the increasing reliance on an overloaded power feed (the electric company did build a second line, but it was burned out during the fires last year) and the need to deal with other potential equipment failures, such as loss of the Studio-Transmitter link (STL), whether by RF or hardware.

In many places, stations are working harder than ever to ensure multiple paths are available to get programming to the transmitters, which, increasingly, are at multiple sites.

It is interesting and instructive to count the number of possible audio paths some stations have installed. For example, one major market station has three different RF STLs, analog and digital, a T-1 line (or better), an Internet connect, an RPU receiver, a telephone line with autocoupler, and a prepared input to accept a laptop with the stations programming schedule and spots ready to go from anywhere.

Similarly, the use of an auxiliary transmission site often can overcome the loss of the main site, whether by weather, fire, power, earthquake, or other causes. The auxiliary site can also overcome the potential hassles with the "air pollution police" – even though one might have hoped they would be a bit more flexible during a temporary situation than has been exhibited in Los Angeles.

Such sites can also be used as an off-site backup of the station's automation or audio chain.

COOPERATION IN THE MARKET

Another auxiliary site solution involves cooperation with other stations in the market and their companies. Two (or more) stations can locate auxiliary transmitters at each other's site, and arrangement that could save a lot in ongoing costs.

During Hurricane Katrina, Clear Channel and Entercom shared studio facilities. While this is not something you might want to do short of an extreme emergency, it is a way to keep the program flowing from

somewhere, no matter what is going on. It seems pretty obvious that, in an emergency situation, just running the "hits" from an automation system is probably going to be perceived poorly by the listeners. Yet, many times, that is all the station can do, as they have no plan to get live people on the air.

Instead, having a plan in place that is understood by the staff will allow a rapid response to anything that threatens to interrupt the station program flow.

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What has worked for you? Let us know; share your knowledge and experience. Use the "contact" page on the BDR site, or send to the BDR-Editor@theBDR.net

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