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# Broadcasters' Desktop Resource

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... edited by Barry Mishkind – the Eclectic Engineer

## NAB 2016

### NWS & BWWG Talk "Message Flooding"



**By Adrienne Abbott**

*[April 2016] EAS is a combination of legally required, volunteer, and cooperative activities that, ideally, come together to alert and protect the public. Unfortunately, those factors also can sometimes lead to frustration on the part of stakeholders.*

As usual, there were certain buzz words at NAB this year and, more than usual, it seemed like most of them were spooned from a bowl of alphabet soup: ATSC 3, OTT, UHD, IPTV, etc.

For attendees from the Southwest, one set of letters stood out – EAS – and with it, the lack of meetings, panels and presentations related to broadcast warning issues. After several years of dealing with multiple weather warnings for typical summer afternoon thunderstorms, the Nevada Broadcasters Association co-sponsored a meeting between officials from the National Weather Service and broadcasters. Oscar Rodriguez offered the NASBA meeting room. Members of the Broadcast Warning Working Group (BWWG) led the discussion.

The main topic on the floor: issues related to the problem that has been called "Message Flood-

ing." This is defined as the National Weather Service practice of sending multiple EAS activations over a two- or three-hour period of severe weather conditions.

#### **WESTERN WEATHER AND EAS**

Nevada EAS Chair and BWWG core member Adrienne Abbott began the meeting with some statistics from the National Weather Service website.

There were 155 flood-related deaths in the US last year. Texas had the highest number at 48. There were no flood related deaths in Nevada. However, she noted that a dozen people had died in a single flash flood incident in northern Arizona and questioned whether there would be more flash flood warnings this year as a result.

#### **MESSAGE FLOODING ISSUES**

Station engineers from Nevada, Arizona, and California told National Warning Coordination Meteorologist Tim Schott about the problems they have experienced dealing with more than a dozen activations in a one hour period for

Severe Thunderstorm Warnings, followed by Flash Flood Warnings.

Sometime the warnings were issued so quickly, they said, that station EAS equipment could not finish relaying the first message, dropping it to relay the second message. The broadcasters questioned whether listeners paid attention to the messages after the fourth or fifth activation for conditions that were generally normal for a hot summer afternoon in the Southwest.

The constant barrage of alerts led one Nevada Local Primary station to stop carrying activations for Severe Thunderstorm Warnings and Flash Flood Warnings.

### **BIGGER THAN A STATE**

Size is an issue for Western broadcasters.

California SECC Vice Chair and BWWG core member Richard Rudman noted San Bernardino County in California is the largest county in the country, larger than most Eastern states. As a result, broadcast stations there receive multiple versions of the same EAS activation because three NWS offices cover the area and each office issues their own warnings. The EAS equipment sees each version of those warnings as a separate activation, multiplying the number of activations for any storm by three.

Schott promised to look into the situation, pointing out that only one office should be issuing activations for a particular area.

### **VOLUNTARY SYSTEM PROBLEMS**

Throughout the meeting, all the attendees noted that while broadcasters have the option of deciding which EAS activations to carry, everyone agreed that they wanted to serve their communities with meaningful warning messages.

Alternatives to multiple weather warnings were discussed, including a request to the National Weather Service to "throttle back" on the num-

ber of activations by considering the overall impact the storm would have on the area.

While Schott and Dan Berc from the Las Vegas Weather Forecast Office (WFO) talked about the ability for forecasters to more closely pinpoint areas of concern within polygons, station engineers noted that they are "broadcasters" with signals which cover wide areas and they have no way to target the EAS activation to only those areas within a polygon.

Greg Cooke of the FCC's Public Safety and Homeland Security Bureau told the group that new technology such as ATSC 3 and other products would provide improved delivery options for NWS and other warnings.

### **POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS**

Plans were presented to partition large counties like Clark County Nevada or San Bernardino, California, into smaller areas.

That would allow broadcasters to automatically eliminate alerts for uninhabited areas or regions not covered by their signals. Several stations had developed their own solution of sending the first activation and mentioning any new or extended EAS weather activations during routine traffic and weather reports.



Other participants described their frustration of having live storm reports, complete with detailed presentations from staff meteorologists with maps and graphics, interrupted by EAS activations with limited information presented by an automated voice and incomplete text that scrolled across the bottom of the screen.

## **LOCALIZING, IMPROVING**

One engineer noted that AMBER Alerts voiced by local law enforcement representatives get the attention of the community.

He suggested that instead of being a "canned" message, weather activations need to have the same kind of realism as an AMBER Alert. In addition, Southern California broadcasters stated that poor audio quality from the NWS offices has been a problem for years with no improve-

ment. They offered to assist NWS technicians in resolving the issues.

Tim Schott told the group that he was open to the suggestions and offers of assistance, as well as initiating a pilot program in the Southwest to email weather briefings designed specifically for broadcasters in the Reno area to use instead of the generic automated messages. He was given a stack of EAS records from July 2015 when the Reno WFO issued 95 EAS activations. He noted the information in the logs would be helpful in determining what NWS could do to resolve some of the issues of multiple activations.

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