



The

Broadcasters' Desktop Resource

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... edited by Barry Mishkind – the Eclectic Engineer

EAS IN ACTION

The 2017 EAS NPT

[September 2017] This was now the third full national EAS test from the agencies in Washington, DC. Have we reached a point where the government can be confident the President can address the whole country when needed?

The FCC clearly hoped that more stations would receive and rebroadcast the NPT this year than last.

As a test, yes, it was successful: we got results. That is the purpose of tests, including those weekly and monthly tests we have been running since the early 1990s. And there are already a number of reports that should keep the FCC and the FEMA busy until the next planned NPT.

What follows is not so much to speak poorly of EAS or the NPT, but to analyze how well it worked.

WHAT DID AND DID NOT WORK

The general consensus is that most stations got the NPT code – and did something.

For a pre-planned national test, version 3, there are a lot of things that happened – many of which should have been foreseen ahead of time.

We could start with the ETRS – the “new” data collection program.

CORES

First of all, stations – even those registered last year – were supposed to visit a new part of the FCC website and register in the new CORES

database, then fill out Form One on the ETRS site.

Simple, eh? Sadly, the Commission appears to have spent about \$3 to hire a contractor to construct the systems – and they apparently over-paid.

Those that registered with CORES were then often tossed into a painful series of slow loading pages with many error messages of wrong passwords and/or wrong or missing FRNs. At times registering and changing passwords failed because the CORES did not talk to ETRS without sometimes long delays. (There was no indication to users when “wrong password” messages, sent them back to CORES to change a password which did not need changing – until CORES finally sent data to ETRS).

ETRS

Of course, after finding their way to ETRS and Form One, correct choices were often unavailable from the dropdown menus. For many, it was hit and miss, until something appeared that they could use.

Filling out Form One was not too hard, as some fields were populated from last year, and the form could be done in 10-15 minutes – but only if you were not trying to use Internet Explorer.

There was no notice anywhere, but pressing “Submit” while using Internet Explorer was prètty much like that Geico spot where two figures had been sawing a log for about a hundred years. It did nothing.

People wrote and called the FCC; in fact, right up to the deadline on August 28th stations wrestled with problems. A few FCC folks did try to help but others went on vacation right as the deadline came up.

Eventually, the word about needing a different browser got out, and many rushed to get Form One done.

A SLIGHT DELAY

Hurricanes Henry, Irma, and Maria had a major impact on markets in Texas and Florida and beyond.

The FCC said stations could delay a bit in filling out the Forms. This was good, but no additional help appeared on the site to respond to the questions that had been pouring in.

COMES THE DAY

While there were reports of “no audio,” “poor audio,” or bad audio, the main problems that developed related to something that users had been asking the FCC to do for well over a year.

Define: Immediately.

The Commission suddenly added that word last year, relating to when an EAN or other alerts had to run. People asked. The manufacturers asked. Silence fell.

If immediately meant “as soon as the message was received” the station had time to chose the IPAWS/CAP feed and language desired. If immediately meant “as soon as the EAN headers hit,” there was no way to make those selections.

With no response from Washington, the manufacturers had no choice to update their receivers, some updates being extensive. Worried that the Enforcement Bureau might try to fine stations – with no word to defuse things – the manufacturers set up their receivers to implement an “immediate” effect when the EAN header came up.

This tended to cause two issues with received NPT messages:

1. There was no way to ensure with the IPAWS/CAP message would be received first or the ones from the LP-1 and LP-2. Those that got the IPAWS/CAP generally had clean, crisp audio. Those that got a feed from the LP-1 or two got the analog audio, good, bad, or indifferent.
2. One of the benefits from IPAWS/CAP was that multi-lingual messages could be supported, But without a way to ensure IPAWS/CAP was the first to be decoded, stations could not predict which language they would be putting on the air.

In other words, while the FCC is pushing the use of multi-lingual messages for EAS, their policies are preventing it in most cases.

THE AUDIO

As noted, there were a number of reports of poor, bad, or no audio.

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Most of the poor/bad audio seem to relate to AM stations being relayed or differing digital rates, such as 41k and 48k, causing audio to speed up or sloooow down.

The no audio seems to have had several causes, but one that should have been foreseen at the station level: idiot IT practices.

We have heard from at least one manufacturer that several IT departments blocked the IPAWS/CAP files containing the text if the NPT. So, the header tones ran, the alert signal ran, but no audio.

In planning ahead, someone should have designated a way for stations to get the audio. This should be a priority for future tests and activations.

AFTER ACTION REPORT

The reports from around the country following the NPT ran back to the ETRS site, and the problems stations had in doing Form Two.

Putting aside the delays – from server overload? – and the issues with Form Two and the use of the “right” browser, the FCC had demanded Form Two be filed the same day as the NPT.

Many stations got caught with the 2016 data that somehow was thought important by someone.

And remember, they had to use the right browser.

What was the problem? Oddly enough, many broadcasters have jobs that make it hard to spend hours trying to file Form Two the same day – or issues that take them into the field and away from any place to fill in Form Two.

More than a few were at mountain sites, and simply were unable to file the form. Nevertheless, all the Commissions Public Notices to this point emphasized the need to file before 11:59 PM EDT or face a fine.

That is until today, when the dates on the ETRS site suddenly changed the due date to November 13th.

We are told that calling the FCC and asking why this ETRS system is such a Kafka-esque experience gets no real response. After all, we have been promised [a Part 11 rewrite](#), are we not?

FINAL SCORE

NPT activated on time:	A
Ease of using web site:	C-
Audio quality during test:	B
Ease of using multi-lingual messages:	F
Quality of information for users:	F-
FCC pro-action to our needs:	F----

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