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EAS Alert

What EAS Is and What It Is Not



By Rod Zeigler

[March 2018] While we have heard about recent botched alerts in Hawaii and other places, the status of the Emergency Alert System (EAS) itself has not changed much, even with the addition of WEA, largely because each entity in the warning arena continues to act like no one else is home. Rod Zeigler suggests a way forward.

Discussion of EAS from Capitol Hill to Main Street seems to be happening with a regularity never seen before.

People are either being over-warned, falsely warned, or not warned at all when emergency situations happen or do not happen. All of these occurrences add more fuel to the "EAS Has A Problem" narrative. From emergency management agencies being unfamiliar with the use of the system to end users having unmet expectations, EAS is under fire from many directions, but is that deserved?

DEFINING THE CORE COMPONENT

What is EAS? That is completely dependent on to whom you are speaking.

From the Congressional hearings it seems it encompasses everyone from the FCC, FEMA, Amateur Radio, broadcasters, State level emergency management and cellular companies. Anything and everything to do with alerting is under the EAS umbrella if you listened to those hearings.

A reasonable person might also think the phase Emergency Alert System to be an all encompassing phrase used to define alerting from origination to consumption by the end user. Historically this understanding had been correct. But now such a view might be the cause of confusion for many in the entire alerting community.

At its simplest level the Emergency Alert System (and Conelrad and EBS before) is a way for the President of the United States to automatically take over the country's over-the-air civilian broadcast transmissions en masse – in order to disseminate vital information immediately.

It was created when OTA transmission of major networks was the primary means of immediate end user news and information consumption.

WHO IS IN CONTROL?

The FCC regulations reflect this yet today: EAS is a broadcast and cable alerting system regulated by the FCC. Period.

EAS has nothing to do with alert origination and it has nothing to do with Wireless Emergency Alerts (WEA) that the cellular industry (regulated by the same FCC) handles – or any other type of alert dissemination.

Meanwhile, the states are allowed to use the EAS for their own needs when the Federal government is not using the system. The FCC Rules and Regulations allude to a State Emergency Communications Committee (SECC) which is supposed to create and maintain a State Plan to ensure that all EAS participants monitor the correct frequencies for that state so that the Federal mission, and in turn the state mission, works.

These state committees have now been given the responsibility of creating and maintaining a multi-lingual alerting data base. This is a separate discussion but is mentioned to illustrate that lacking an honest definition, anything can become anything if it is politically expedient.

WHAT EAS REALLY ALL ABOUT

Basically, what we have learned so far is that EAS is both an all encompassing *and* a narrowly defined system *at the same time*.

My suggestion is to rename the legacy Emergency Alert System to a simpler, and more truthful, Broadcast Emergency Alert, Broadcast Alert System – or something else more truly descriptive of its historic mission. Where broadcast and cable were at one time the only game in town, in most places, for alerting the public to emergencies, cellular phone technology, the Internet, and a number of other technological advances have relegated broadcast alerting to the status of just another tool in the alerting tool box.

If we were to do this, EAS then can be used as an umbrella phrase for this alerting tool box. It would be easier to understand at all levels since it is already being used as such and it would not reflect badly on SECC's and the broadcast and cable industry in particular when some other part of the system breaks down.

DEFINING THE MISSION

While we are renaming the broadcast and cable portion of the alerting system, let us also define the mission of SECC's and give them some legitimacy from a Federal perspective.

This will go a long way in getting states to create and maintain them and would hopefully alleviate some of the problems we see now. In some states' SECCs and LECCs (Local ECCs) are active and vital parts of emergency preparedness. In other states the exact opposite is true.

We even have seen instances where other state agencies have taken on what they thought were the responsibilities of SECCs only to engage in practices contrary to the FCC Rules and Regulations.



I really cannot fault them for this. In lieu of an SECC that was even marginally active with representation from all facets of emergency alerting in the State, and in lieu of any reasonable definition of an SECC, mistakes and errors were bound to happen.

A CLEARER PATH AHEAD

In closing I propose that we quit using the definition of a duck to describe everything on the farm, including the farmer.

By doing this the various animals will be expected to act in a way that is consistent with their nature and politicians might quit trying to milk the chickens.

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