

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

EAS ALERT

After Hawaii – What You Need to Know About Public Warnings

[February 2018] Early on the morning of Saturday, January 13th an alert was sent from Hawaii's Emergency Management Agency (HI-EMA). Saying a ballistic missile was headed to Hawaii and that it was not a drill caused over a half an hour of sheer panic for the state's residents.



Perhaps you saw the video of people who received the Alert and literally did not know what to do.

Maybe your heart went out to them with a thought similar to "There but for the grace of God go I."

It looked real. It said it was real. And all heck definitely broke loose.

Until 38 minutes later, the word got out that it was a false alert.

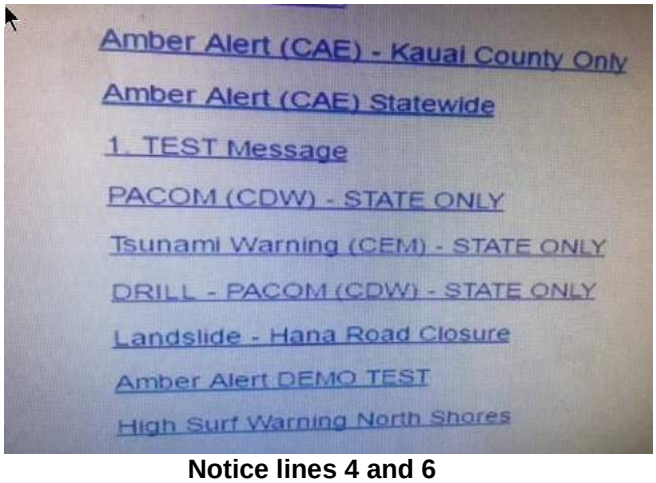
Then it got interesting.

FINDING OUT WHAT HAPPENED

Over the next three weeks, one at a time, a number of explanations came from HI-EMA, trying to explain why it happened.

"A wrong button got pushed." "A mistake made during a shift change." "Confusion between choices on a drop-down menu."

"Confusion over a software screen that sent the actual alert."



Notice lines 4 and 6

And finally, "I was sure it was a real alert."

Dissecting what happened is getting a bit clearer as officials resign or are fired and the various political entities open investigations to bring various government employee and regulators to testify in public.

Invariably most responses included promises to make sure that "it will never happen again."

The current "truth" is that a former HI-EMA employee claims to have "truly believed" that missiles were on the way. The FCC, the FEMA, the DoD (Department of Defense), and the Congress all are hard at work to prevent the repetition of this particular – if not all – false alerts.

But it has happened before, and it likely will happen (it has: a false tsumani alert was issued on the East Coast) – though not necessarily a ballistic mis-sile alert – because the Emergency Alert System (EAS) is a kludge of federal mandates, local options, and a general disregard by most of the broadcast industry.

The part that runs on cell phones (WEA) is similarly hampered by spotty industry participation, and inadequate procedures and training for warning originators.

FAILURE TO COMMUNICATE

For over two decades, broadcast groups and FCC committees have warned of the lack of a cohesive framework that ensures valid protocols and training.

The Partnership for Public Warning (PPW) told the FCC repeatedly that a coherent, unified warning strategy was needed.

Instead the FCC has continued the policy of making EAS operations for Weekly and Monthly Tests and the delivery of Presidential messages (EAN) mandatory for broadcasters, but everything else is voluntary. Participation by the EMs, of course, is totally voluntary.

Some have argued that merely putting EAS encoders in Emergency Management (EM) agency operation centers without adequate training and procedures makes it very easy for delays or incorrect information to go out to the public at a time when timely accurate information is needed to help save lives and property.

One might compare it to handing someone a loaded gun without any training.

NO DESIRE TO COMMUNICATE

Worse, the various agencies rarely talk to broadcasters – some due to trust issues or local "security" policies – and broadcasters generally leave all EAS matters to an engineer, often part time or on a contract. A solid mechanical system exists, but content can be problematical.

As one EAS subject expert has written, *"The day of the emergency is a bad day to get to know your local emergency management community."*

The practical result is that when a real disaster hits, often the parties fail to communicate. Some of it is by error, some by literal incompetence.

What else could you conclude when a Colorado agency decided to only use "Reverse 911" to warn people of a forest fire – after the phone lines were burned out? There were similar reports in California during recent fires there.

Periodically, we learn of false Tsunami, Earthquake, or Evacuation alerts, sent out by agencies "testing" the system, but paying scant attention to what they actually are activating. And that is not to even start with discussion of the quality of audio sent to stations, nor the frequency (aka "message flooding").

POOR S/N

Complicating an already confusing public warning picture is the rise of social media.

Many in government think that issuing warnings on phones, Twitter, and other social media *have replaced* warning methods like EAS. But, those methods are likely to be interrupted – or totally fail – due to the very emergencies they are supposed to tell the public about.

Just as fire takes out phone lines, floods and tornados quickly take down power – and without power, how much Internet is there, really? This is where radio can shine if it is used.

Well over 60 years of serious research on warnings still tells us that the EM community should use all *available means*, including social media, to make sure the message gets through, details are delivered in longer form warning systems, and warning systems work together to motivate more people to take protective actions.

SOME COOPERATION

There are a few areas where local broadcasters and EM's have gotten together to build a stable, reliable alerting system for local events.

In these all too rare cases when the EM community and broadcasters have good relationships and proper procedures and training are in place, tests and real public warnings go much more smoothly.

However, they are not in the majority by any means. Most State Emergency Coordinating Committees (SECC) and their local equivalents (LECC) are poorly operating unpaid volunteer groups, with relatively little authority, and the burden of the FCC increasing the demand for lots of paperwork.

For example, in 2012, when the current EAS was "upgraded" with the FEMA taking over distribution on a national level, a new layer was added, and the learning curve of including the FEMA along with EMs continues to cause issues in many places.

UNHEARD VOICES

Groups like the Broadcast Warning Working Group (BWWG) continue to offer help to the FCC in realizing the needs of broadcasters and assisting communication with the FEMA, EM's, and the National Weather Service (which uses distinctly different and incompatible software).

Unfortunately, qualified EAS subject experts from the broadcast community are almost never called to testify to any hearing. And FCC officials have been promising a Part 11 (EAS) rewrite for now over 7 years.

Nevertheless, in many ways we are still where we were in 1997, with the FEMA part grafted on, and more options for confusion.

SO WHAT DO WE DO?

First, we have to realize that the United States still does not have an overall unified top-to-bottom public warning strategy called for by the PPW in those reports written twenty years ago.

Thanks to FEMA, we do have a name for this strategy, the Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS). IPAWS is a beautifully descriptive name for something that does not exist – yet. Up to now, there is no solid description of what constitutes an EAS Plan.

If the purpose of emergency public warnings is to deliver timely protective actions to a public at risk, so more lives and property can be saved, should not the promise of the IPAWS name be a high priority goal for us all?

As a plan is developed, it is clear the next step is one often ignored due to cost: training, training, training.

TRAINING, BUT WITH PURPOSE

The folks in Hawaii would contend that they did a lot of training.

But was it the right kind of training, or was it just a "follow the rote of the lines on a page/screen?" Did HI-EMA make the training meaningful or was it just a burden to run at shift change? The answer is fairly obvious, an afterthought in far too many EM headquarters.

The result of some 20 years of EAS operations should be clarity about what works (and what

does not), what gets information out to the public quickly and clearly, with few errors.

Many broadcast folks stand ready, reaching out to help EMs and others to understand and train.

Yet, time after time, this agency or that agency issues a hot code alert by mistake that surprises the local population, even panicking them, if they are paying attention. Sadly, in the end, people start to ignore warnings.

ACHIEVING THE GOAL

As noted above, the purpose is getting information and clear directions to the public as quickly as possible. So, how can this be done?

First, it will take a re-commitment by many broadcasters to the concept of "*being there to serve* during emergencies."

Rather than leave EAS or WEA to be a series of minimal actions to meet FCC requirements, station managers and program directors ought to reach out, meet the local EM's, and work out ways to better coordinate delivery of critical warnings – especially when the power (and therefore Internet, cell phones, etc) is down. It can be done. But only if *the right stakeholders* take on their part.

Second, the HI-EMA event, along with others shows that, as hard as they try, the makers of EAS boxes have failed to clearly educate users how to operate their products. Sure, it can be a one button contact closure to fire off an RWT. But the decision tree is clearly confusing. (Yes, the guy in HI says he did mean to send out a real alert.)

Whether solved by requiring two persons, using a large red button, or having flashing red warnings on the screen, manufacturers seem to need to rebuild their decision tree so tests and alerts do not have the opportunity to intertwine.

And, again: training, training, training. This is not a place to trim budget/efforts.

Third: The FEMA. Although a newer kid on the block, the FEMA has the mandate, structure, and the money to help EM's "see the light," and really train their staffs in understanding what happens when the alert leaves the EOC. The FEMA can certify those agencies privileged to use IPAWS. And they should.

No, we are not saying let people get harmed because the local EM EOC is not certified and, as such, unable to feed the alert to the system. We are saying the FEMA should be pro-active in helping each EOC to be certified – understanding what happens when they alert, how it sounds on the air, and what it looks like on cell phones and computer screens. It really will not cost that much.

Next, the FCC. The EAS has, in many ways, outgrown the FCC. This is clear from the way the FCC sees EAS merely as a way to collect fines. The FCC needs to stop issuing policies, paperwork, web reporting sites, and *get on with the Part 11 rewrite*, taking into consideration how broadcasting works.



To emphasize: help in rewriting Part 11 *must come from the broadcast community.* The Commission must pay attention to the people that are on the line in the field. Whether looking Part 11 or the reporting website, we urge the FCC to talk to broadcasters – *and listen to them.*

Here is one practical suggestion: Instead of making more demands for web reporting screens and for data that is marginally useful, kill the RWT.

Make the RMT more useful, includ-ing letting the SECC in each region talk to their stations to find out where the problems are located and fix them.

Finally, Congress. There is a clear need for Congress to take what IPAWS implies – a national warning plan – and do as the PPW sought: nudging (or forcing) the various agencies to cooperate and help formulate such a plan. No one expects this is going to be easy as history has shown that the FCC, the FEMA, the National Weather Service (NWS), cellular providers, and local Emergency Managers have never really brought that cooperation to bear.

Those reading this can also help. Broadcasters encourage your GM and PD to get involved now, before an emergency. If you have contacts in the EM community, use them to encourage their cooperation.

To repeat: as one EAS subject expert has written, *"The day of the emergency is a bad day to get to know your local emergency management community."*

This really applies from the national top down.

GETTING THE RIGHT HELP

As much as is possible, leave alerting to the professionals.

Congress normally should have no reason to be involved – although it often gets involved for many political or power reasons. But they usually jump in when there is perceived to be a vacuum of control.

And that is where things stand.

Among the professionals, a major key is avoiding the NIH (Not Invented Here) mentality that often afflicts government agencies that defend internal programs to the point of not cooperating with others.

For this reason we exhort local stations, EM's, and the entire emergency alert community to be pro-active and find out how easy it really is for local/regional folks to support one another to protect and inform the public.

When *that* is the aim, fewer false alerts will occur, more public confidence will build, and the EM and broadcast community will have a loud voice to be used to help everyone when there is trouble. **-theBDR**

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We acknowledge with thanks assistance from Richard Rudman, former chair of the Partnership for Public Warning, for his valuable input to this article.

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