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TERROR DISASTER ALERTS US

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Emergency Alerts: Coming to Your Cell Phone?

Feds consider a system to deliver warnings to the public via text messages.

Lesley K. McCullough, Medill News Service
Jul 28, 2005 10:00 pm

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WASHINGTON, D.C. -- Emergency alerts may soon be delivered by more than just your television set or old-fashioned radio: The federal government is considering alerting you via text message should a possible natural disaster or terrorist attack directly affect your area.

The Senate Subcommittee on Disaster Prevention and Prediction met this week on Capitol Hill to discuss creating a national, integrated all-hazards alert system that uses digital technology to efficiently send public warnings to Americans.

Updating Crisis Tech

In case of a national emergency or natural disaster, the president already can communicate with the nation through the Emergency Alert System (EAS). However, during the last five decades the system has been in place, a national alert has never been fully activated--not even during the September 11 terrorist attacks.

The current system, developed in the Cold War era, can transmit messages only to radios and televisions and is simply outdated, says Senator Ted Stevens (R-Alaska), chair of the Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation committee.

"It was a good system in its time, but I don't know many people that carry radios around in their pockets anymore," Stevens says. "Therefore, we need to be able to communicate with people on their cell phones and BlackBerries."

The technology to deliver alerts to your PC or handheld device exists, but EAS primarily works at the state and local level to disperse regional messages, including AMBER alerts, hazardous-material incidents, and severe-weather warnings, Reynold Hoover, director of the office of National Security Coordination within the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), told the committee. A national scheme must integrate the various regional systems and technologies in which municipalities have already invested millions of dollars across the country.

Legislation Needed

"A public-warning interoperability solution will not be achieved by the federal government purchasing a new national emergency alert network or buying a software application," said Richard Taylor, testifying on behalf of the National Emergency Alerting and Response System

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Initiative. "We need standards for interfacing existing programs."

Hoover echoed that sentiment. "We need legislation to tell us exactly what the integration policy will be," he said.

Noting that the threat of future terrorist attacks still looms, subcommittee chair Senator Jim DeMint (R-South Carolina) said government should play an important role in the creation of a national alert system.

"The system is too important to the nation not to get it right," DeMint said.

The federal government is still exploring options. Hoover said FEMA is planning to test a Geo-Targeted Alerting System that uses reverse 911 technologies to provide specific and targeted warnings to individual households and businesses, such as warning of an impending tornado. Once the infrastructure is in place and integration methods are resolved, Hoover said, FEMA may offer a consumer opt-in system; people could log on to a designated Web site and sign up for the types of alert messages they want to receive. But because the system is still in an early stage, he said, it is unclear what the cost, if any, would be to consumers.

While an exact timeline for national implementation of an all-hazards alert system is still unknown, Hoover said FEMA should know more from the pilot studies next year.

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