



May 13, 2025

The Emergency Alert System: Status of Current Funding for Improvements

Emergency Alerts: Background and Distribution Methods

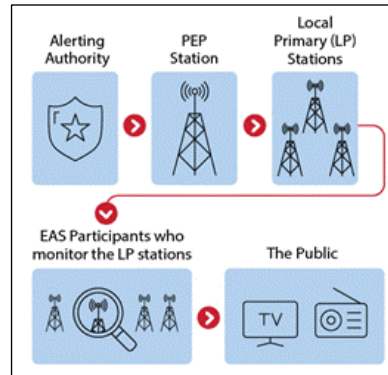
Responsive and effective emergency alerts can increase the likelihood that people will take protective action to mitigate risk of harm during an emergency. The Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS) is an internet-based system that acts as a gateway between alerting authorities and communications pathways used to disseminate alerts. IPAWS uses three primary pathways to deliver emergency alerts: the Emergency Alert System (EAS), Wireless Emergency Alerts (WEA), and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Weather Radio (NWR). The EAS is a public warning system with the widest reach of emergency communications pathways used by state and local authorities to deliver important emergency information to the public via a number of communications methods and technologies. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) administers the EAS, and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) creates technical standards and procedures for entities that disseminate EAS messages. NOAA's National Weather Service (NWS) is the most frequent activator of the EAS and typically uses NWR to activate the EAS to distribute public warnings about hazardous weather conditions. State and local governments also commonly use the EAS to distribute AMBER Alerts for abducted children.

EAS messages can be distributed through two formats: radio and television broadcasts, the legacy-based format, and IPAWS, the internet-based format. Two distribution formats create redundancy in case one system fails. The legacy-based format uses a daisy-chain method of distribution (**Figure 1**). A designated *primary entry point* (PEP) station—a private or commercial radio broadcast station that sends EAS messages initiated by the President—receives an alert from an alerting authority. *Local primary* (LP) stations—select EAS participants who monitor PEP stations—then broadcast the alert to EAS participants in their listening areas, who then transmit the alert to the public.

Under the internet-based system, IPAWS, EAS participants receive alerts via an internet-connected server. Before or during an emergency, alerting authorities submit the alert to the IPAWS Open Platform for Emergency Networks (IPAWS-OPEN), which authenticates the sender and validates that the alert is formatted in the *common alerting protocol* (CAP)—an international standard that enables multiple networks to simultaneously receive and distribute an alert. IPAWS-OPEN transmits the message received from the alerting authority and distributes it to the public through several communications pathways. As of 2025, approximately one-third of all counties in the United States

do not have the capability to send alerts through IPAWS, reportedly because of system cost.

Figure 1. EAS Legacy Distribution Method



Source: CRS.

Nationwide EAS Tests and Results

The Integrated Public Alert and Warning System Modernization Act of 2015 (P.L. 114-143) directs FEMA to conduct a nationwide EAS test at least once every three years. According to FEMA, testing the EAS helps the agency evaluate the operational readiness of the country's emergency alerting infrastructure and determine what, if any, technical improvements are needed.

In August 2021, FEMA and the FCC conducted a nationwide test of the EAS using the legacy-based distribution system. Findings revealed that 89.3% of EAS participants received the test message and 87.1% of retransmissions were successful. Six PEP stations experienced issues with their audio transmission.

In October 2023, FEMA and the FCC tested the IPAWS distribution method of the EAS. The FCC reported that IPAWS had a retransmission rate of 93.6%, an increase compared with the 2021 nationwide test of the legacy-based system. The test also yielded more reported issues related to equipment configuration and failures compared with those reported in the 2021 test of the legacy-based system. At the time of the IPAWS EAS test, 23% of participants used either outdated software or equipment that no longer supported software updates. Up-to-date equipment had the highest receipt and retransmission rates, whereas equipment with out-of-date software had the lowest.

Recent Congressional Funding for Improvements to the EAS

On March 15, 2022, Congress appropriated approximately \$40 million for the creation of the Next Generation

Warning System Grant Program (NGWSGP) through the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2022 (P.L. 117-103). The NGWSGP is a competitive grant program to mitigate the cost for public television and radio broadcasters to expand their alerting, warning, and interoperability capabilities by replacing and upgrading infrastructure to be able to receive alerts from IPAWS. Congress later appropriated another \$56 million to the grant program in FY2023 and another \$40 million in FY2024. By allocating this funding, according to the House Committee on Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security, Congress intended the NGWSGP to help public media entities replace and upgrade aging infrastructure needed to enhance alert and warning capabilities, as well as national resilience by increasing the use of the internet-based EAS distribution method.

FEMA made funding available to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) to solicit sub-grant applications for NGWSGP funding. The NGWSGP would fill gaps in alerting to underserved areas; improve the ability of local broadcast stations to receive, broadcast, and distribute EAS alerts from IPAWS; implement technology upgrades to enhance broadcasting through the internet-based system; and improve station resiliency and alerting through IPAWS user training.

FEMA created the grant on a cost reimbursement basis, such that public media stations would incur expenses when replacing and upgrading their infrastructure, after which the CPB would seek reimbursement from FEMA on behalf of the sub-grantees.

Executive Actions Impacting EAS Improvement Funding

On January 27, 2025, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) published a memorandum for the heads of executive departments and agencies requiring a “temporary pause of agency grant, loan, and other financial assistance programs.” The memo directed agencies to complete a comprehensive analysis of most federal financial assistance programs and temporarily pause all activities related to disbursement of funds, apparently including a freeze on reimbursements from FEMA for the \$40 million in funding from the FY2022 appropriation to the NGWSGP. At the time of the freeze, CPB had executed over 40 contracts to public media stations and fully committed approximately \$18.7 million. The Administration’s actions prompted numerous suits challenging the categorical pause on disbursing federal funds, and these lawsuits continued after OMB rescinded the memo on January 29, 2025.

One such lawsuit was filed by the CPB against FEMA on March 13, 2025, in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia to lift the hold on the NGWSGP funds. The court has not reached a decision on the merits of the case, but it denied the CPB’s request for a temporary restraining order on March 17, 2025. The status of the NGWSGP funding remains uncertain as litigation related to the hold on federal funds is ongoing. On April 15, 2025, Senators Ed Markey and Lisa Murkowski sent a letter to FEMA requesting a timeline by April 29, 2025, for unfreezing the

repayments. As of the date of this In Focus, no response from FEMA had been made public.

Congressional Considerations

Bills have been introduced in previous Congresses that would expand access to and use of emergency alerts in the United States. Some of these bills have been reintroduced in the 119th Congress (e.g., S. 1003, S. 315, H.R. 2076, and H.R. 979).

In light of uncertainty surrounding the state of the funding freeze on the NGWSGP, Congress could consider several EAS oversight options. In the report of the August 2021 legacy-based EAS distribution system, FEMA mentioned its work with several State Emergency Communication Committees to conduct monthly statewide and weekly station-level tests of the PEP stations. Subjects for congressional oversight could include the results of FEMA’s tests of the PEP stations and any improvements or other changes found since the last nationwide test.

Similarly, Congress could consider undertaking general oversight into alerting systems. A 2020 Government Accountability Office report recommended that “FEMA establish procedures to prioritize and address pending IPAWS applications and that FCC develop goals and performance measures to monitor the WEA improvements.” Follow-up oversight could include evaluating the efficacy of (1) social media platforms to send emergency alerts and (2) guidance and training for developing alert content—as directed in the Weather Alert Response and Notification Act (WARN Act; H.R. 1076).

On May 1, 2025, President Donald J. Trump signed Executive Order 14290, *Ending Taxpayer Subsidization of Biased Media*, seeking to end federal funding to the CPB. CPB is the largest single source of funding for public media, including the Public Broadcasting Station (PBS) and National Public Radio (NPR). NPR manages the Public Radio Satellite System, which receives and disseminates alerts sent by the President. PBS operates PBS WARN, which enables public television stations to send WEAs over their transmitters as a redundant path for cellular WEA connections. By funding NPR and PBS, CPB is often viewed as playing an integral role in helping public media entities distribute emergency alerts through the legacy-based system. The No Propaganda Act (H.R. 1211) in the 119th Congress would prohibit federal funding for the CPB. If Congress decides to reduce or eliminate federal funding for CPB, it may consider options for an alternative pathway from broadcasting to disseminate emergency communications. This could help ensure redundancy in the emergency communications infrastructure by continuing to maintain a distribution method other than IPAWS.

Additional CRS Resources

CRS Report R48363, *The Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS): Primer and Issues for Congress*, by Amanda H. Peskin

CRS Report R48315, *AM Broadcast Radio in Motor Vehicles*, by Dana A. Scherer

Amanda H. Peskin, Analyst in Telecommunications Policy

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.