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IN FOCUS

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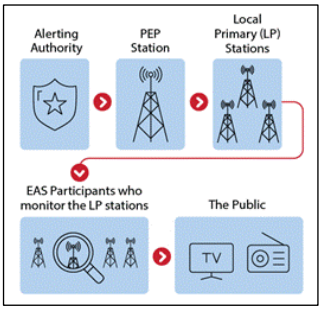
The Emergency Alert System: Status of Current Funding for Improvements

Emergency Alerts: Background and Distribution Methods

Responsive and effective emergency alerts can increase the likelihood that people will take protective action to mitigate the risk of harm during an emergency. The Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS) is an internet-based system that connects alerting authorities and communications pathways used to disseminate alerts. IPAWS uses three primary pathways to deliver emergency alerts: the Emergency Alert System (EAS), the Wireless Emergency Alerts (WEA) system, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Weather Radio (NWR). The EAS is a public warning system with the widest reach of the 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 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 (a legacy-media-based, or "legacy," format) and IPAWS. The 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 connects directly to FEMA operations centers to send alerts initiated by the President—receives an alert from an alerting authority. *Local primary* (LP) stations—select EAS participants (e.g., radio and television broadcasters, cable television, wireless cable systems, and satellite and wireline operators) who monitor PEP stations—then broadcast the alert to EAS participants in their listening areas, who then transmit the alert to the public.

Figure 1. EAS Legacy Distribution Format



Source: CRS.

Notes: Primary entry point (PEP) stations are private or commercial radio broadcast stations that receive and disseminate alerts initiated by the President.

Under 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.

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 distribution format. Findings revealed that 89.3% of EAS participants received the test message, and 87.1% of retransmissions were successful. Six PEP stations out of the seven that experienced issues transmitting alerts specifically noted issues with their audio transmission.

In October 2023, FEMA and the FCC tested IPAWS distribution 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 format. The test also

yielded more reported issues related to equipment configuration and failures compared with those reported in the 2021 test of the legacy format. 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 EAS

In 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). By appropriating 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 alerting and warning capabilities, as well as national resilience, by increasing the use of the IPAWS distribution format, with a focus on filling gaps in alerting to underserved areas. FEMA made an award to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) to solicit sub-grant applications from public media entities for NGWSGP funding.

FEMA created the grant on a cost reimbursement basis, such that public media entities would incur expenses when replacing and upgrading their infrastructure, after which 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. This pause appears to include 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 lawsuits challenging the pause on disbursing federal funds, and these lawsuits continued after OMB rescinded the memo on January 29, 2025.

One such lawsuit was filed by 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 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 publication of this In Focus, no response from FEMA had been made public. However, on April 25, 2025, FEMA released its hold on the $40 million in FY2022 funding, allowing CPB to resume grant review and reimbursement.

Congressional Considerations

Over the years, some Members of Congress have sought to expand access to and use of emergency alerting in the United States, including through legislation introduced in the 119th Congress (e.g., S. 1003, S. 315, H.R. 2076, and H.R. 979).

As Congress determines what, if any, legislative action related to emergency alerts it may consider, it may also consider oversight activities. For example, in its August 2021 report on the legacy EAS distribution format, FEMA mentioned its work with several State Emergency Communication Committees to conduct monthly statewide and weekly station-level tests of the PEP stations. Congress could consider directing FEMA to report the results of these tests and any improvements or other changes made since the last nationwide test to Congress.

Similarly, Congress could consider implementation of a 2020 U.S. Government Accountability Office report, which 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." Specifically, Congress could evaluate the efficacy of (1) social media platforms to send emergency alerts and (2) guidance and training for developing alert content—as proposed in the Weather Alert Response and Notification Act (WARN Act; H.R. 1076).

On May 1, 2025, President Donald Trump signed Executive Order 14290, "Ending Taxpayer Subsidization of Biased Media," seeking to end federal funding to CPB. CPB is the largest single source of funding for public media, including the Public Broadcasting Service (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 Weather Alert Response and Notification (PBS WARN), which enables public television stations to send WEA messages over their transmitters as a redundant path for cellular WEA connections. Some observers view CPB's funding of NPR and PBS as integral in helping public media entities distribute emergency alerts through the legacy-based system, especially given some Members' concerns that ending federal funding for CPB could leave rural, remote, and tribal communities un- or underserved. The House passed H.R. 4 on June 12, 2025, which would rescind a total of $1.1 billion in advance appropriations for FY2026 (P.L. 118-47)and FY2027 (P.L. 119-4) to CPB. If Congress decides to reduce or eliminate federal funding for CPB, it could consider options other than broadcasting to disseminate emergency communications. This could help ensure redundancy in the emergency communications infrastructure by continuing to maintain a distribution format other than IPAWS.

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