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The Emergency Alert System: Status of Current Funding for Improvements

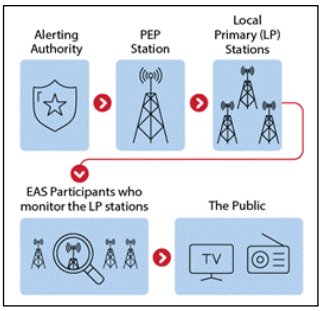
Emergency Alerts: Background and Distribution Methods

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: broadcasts via radio and television (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. See CRS Report R48632, *National Alerts: A Primer and Selected Issues for Congress*, by Amanda H. Peskin.

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, several 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 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.

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). 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.

Prior to Congress passing the Rescissions Act of 2025 (P.L. 119-28), which effectively defunded CPB, CPB was the largest single source of funding for public media. For more information, see CRS Report R48545, *Public Broadcasting: Background Information and Issues for Congress*, by Brian E. Humphreys. National Public Radio (NPR) manages the Public Radio Satellite System, which receives and disseminates alerts sent by the President. The Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) operates PBS Warning, Alert & Response Network (PBS WARN), which enables public television stations to send WEA messages over their transmitters as a redundant path for cellular WEA connections. Some observers viewed CPB's former funding of NPR and PBS as integral in helping public media entities distribute emergency alerts through the legacy-based system. Some Members raised concerns that ending federal funding for CPB could leave rural, remote, and tribal communities un- or underserved.

Timeline of Actions Affecting 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 appeared 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. On April 25, 2025, FEMA released its hold on the $40 million in FY2022 funding, allowing CPB to resume grant review and reimbursement.

On May 28, 2025, President Donald Trump sent a letter to Congress requesting to rescind a total of $9.4 billion in funding to CPB, the Department of State, the U.S. Agency for International Development, the U.S. Institute of Peace, and other international aid programs. On July 24, 2025, the President signed into law P.L. 119-28, which rescinded a total of $1.1 billion in advance appropriations for FY2026 (P.L. 118-47) and FY2027 (P.L. 119-4) to CPB, among other provisions. On July 31, 2025, the Senate Appropriations Committee reported its FY2026 Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education, and Related Agencies bill (S. 2587), which did not include funding for CPB. On August 1, 2025, CPB announced that it was winding down operations.

FEMA released a notice of funding opportunity (NOFO) for the NGWSGP on August 6, 2025. In the NOFO, FEMA changed eligible applicants from public media entities to states and Indian tribes and generally limited sub-grant applicants to those that do not include "foreign nationals or noncitizens." The NOFO's performance measures mentioned serving "rural areas" and "areas with limited communications." However, the NOFO also stated that allowable projects "will support states, territories, and tribal nations." On August 18, 2025, CPB issued a press release confirming that FEMA is to assume responsibility for disbursing funding for the NGWSGP.

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).

Congress may consider options other than broadcasting to disseminate emergency communications, such as gaming consoles, streaming services, and social media—media systems that the FCC identified as commonly used by the public but generally not for receiving emergency messages. This could help ensure redundancy in the emergency communications infrastructure by continuing to maintain a distribution format in addition to IPAWS.

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