

Equipping Mobile Phones with Broadcast Radio Capability for Emergency Preparedness

Issue

Nearly everyone has a mobile phone – it's how people keep in touch with family and friends while on the go. For little cost, manufacturers can include a receiver for broadcast radio in mobile phones that would give consumers a convenient new way to access free radio service, and more importantly, improve public safety by ensuring that broadcasters' Emergency Alert System (EAS) messages and critical information reach the widest possible audience.

History

Since the 1950s, broadcasters have been the backbone of the public warning system and remain so today. Broadcasters' emergency information goes well beyond providing EAS messages. Broadcasters often go live with wall-to-wall coverage during emergencies, providing valuable information on storm paths, evacuation routes and other critical information. The next generation of public alerting was envisioned in the post-9/11 world as integrating other technologies or platforms to reach Americans that may be on the move when a major incident occurs. Broadcasters fully support this goal, which would be furthered by including radio receivers in mobile devices.

Unfortunately, the penetration of broadcast radio capability in mobile phones is substantially lower in the U.S. than in the global market. By the end of this year, global market penetration is expected to reach 45 percent of active mobile phones versus approximately ten percent (or less) for the U.S., primarily because mobile phone operators in the U.S. enjoy exclusive control over the manufacturing of handsets for their services.

NAB Position

NAB has been working to explain to both mobile telephone operators and policymakers the benefits to the American public of expanding the availability of radio service in mobile phones.

First, unlike the text-based commercial mobile alert system (CMAS) being developed by the wireless industry that may not be available for another two to three years, radio in mobile handsets is ready today. Hundreds of millions of mobile handsets in Europe already incorporate radio functionality, and in the United States, at least 30 models of mobile handsets currently have this capability.

Second, it is a cost-effective way for ensuring that the public has ready access to lifesaving information. It would cost \$1 or less per device to incorporate radio functionality in a mobile handset. Third, there is no risk that radio receivers in mobile phones will clog up the existing switched wireless networks and impede the delivery of important emergency information. Finally, and most importantly, radio reception in mobile handsets will make Americans safer. A mobile handset with FM radio reception provides consumers with one-stop shopping for both emergency alerts and in-depth emergency information. Indeed, a 2010 survey revealed that 73 percent of Americans believe having a radio-enabled mobile phone would be "important" during an emergency.

Broadcasters have been the primary source for emergency information for six decades and have saved countless lives. For the benefit of the American public, ensuring all mobile devices are broadcast radio ready should be a critical component of any next-generation wireless alerting solution.

Action Needed

Congress, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the FCC and the mobile phone industry should consider ways to expand the availability of broadcast radio service in mobile phones.

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