

GETTING THE WORD TO THE PEOPLE

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Nearly everyday some part of our Nation is hit by heavy weather. The U.S. National Weather Service (NWS) is involved in a major modernization and associated restructuring program. Experiences with the new technology have exceeded all expectations for the issuance of weather warnings. The lead time for severe weather warnings using the next generation weather radar is up to 30 minutes. At the same time, the U.S. Geological Survey is involved in modernizing the Nations seismic monitoring network.

But, it doesn't matter how good the technology is or how accurate and timely the warnings and forecasts are, if they don't reach all citizens in a timely and understandable manner they have little value. With this in mind, a major goal of these modernization activities is to also improve the Nation's hazard warning system in order to get the word to the people.

Today, we have in place a strong public-private partnership for the dissemination of warnings and other vital information to the public. These include:

NOAA Weather Radio (NWR), the sole government radio system for providing direct warnings of natural disasters to private homes. This life-saving radio network of 380 stations covers all 50 states and is within listening range of 90% of the population. During severe weather and other emergencies, these radios (which can be battery operated) can be automatically activated, so that the warning message is audible, alerting the listener of impending danger.

The NOAA Weather Wire Service (NWWS) is a satellite-based communications delivery service providing forecasts, warnings, advisories, and other

data to extend users such as emergency managers, public safety officials, the media and others.

Since 1983, the NWS has operated a family of medium-speed communication services called "The Family of Services" (FOS) which brings near real-time weather and flood data and other hazard information to external users such as the media and private weather information companies.

The Weather Channel, a 24-hour-per-day cable television channel reaches over 60 million homes in the United States, relaying NWS warnings and forecasts and vital information on other natural hazards as well as on preparedness and awareness to its viewers.

Because of their universality, commercial radio and television broadcasts are particularly effective in issuing warnings. Recognizing this potential, the broadcast media have arranged to disseminate NWS severe weather and flood warnings, as well as other natural hazard related information. Meteorologists at most television stations and some radio stations ensure the quality and timeliness of the information disseminated.

The Emergency Broadcast System (EBS) is another vital link in getting warnings to the public. The EBS was originally established in 1964 to provide an efficient way to communicate with the American public in the event of war, threat of war, and grave national crisis. In recent years the EBS has greatly expanded to encompass the state and local levels as well. The system is now activated more than 100 times per month to disseminate natural hazard

information to the public. Under a statement of requirement for communications with the general public during periods of national emergency, FEMA and the Federal Communications Commission determine technical arrangements for the establishment of the optimum EBS, and the NOAA NWS assists in developing a viable state and local EBS. In the near future, the EBS will be upgraded. This historic upgrade, the first in over 30 years, will be driven by state-of-the-art technology. NWR message encoding and protocol capabilities are being evaluated now for inclusion in the new EBS.

Plans are also underway to enhance the NWR, NWWS and FOS with an "all hazards" capability by incorporating earthquake, volcano, and landslide information provided by the U.S. Geological Survey and post-event information, such as locations of shelters and other emergency services, etc., provided by state and emergency management officials.

But not everyone receives the latest information. Radio and television programming is not always interrupted when emergency messages are released. Some people are sleeping, some could be watching movies on video recorders, others are out of range of the electronic media. Many, such as the infirm and disabled, do not have instant access to warnings.

To overcome this problem, we have set a goal is to place a NWR receiver in every school, hospital, nursing home and day-care center in our country through a partnership with state and local government and the private sector. Just like smoke detectors and other home safety features, NWR should be found in every home. Another goal is to make the NWR frequencies available on all automobile radios.

The benefit is quite obvious...a system which provides instantaneous receipt of natural hazard warnings as well as vital preparedness information, will allow people to take the necessary precautions to safeguard their lives and their homes. During a disaster, NOAA Weather Radio will provide instant contact with anyone who has a receiver.

By heightening the awareness of our citizens to the impacts of natural hazards, they will be able to help themselves. They will make the right decisions and know how to respond when a disaster strikes. NWR is a simple inexpensive device to help accomplish this goal.