



Highlights of [GAO-07-411](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

During emergencies, the public needs accurate and timely information. Through the Emergency Alert System (EAS), the media play a pivotal role, assisting emergency management personnel in communicating to the public. GAO reviewed (1) the media's ability to meet federal requirements for participating in EAS, (2) stakeholder views on the challenges facing EAS and potential changes to it, and (3) the progress made toward developing an integrated alert system. GAO reviewed the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) proposed rulemaking on EAS and interviewed media outlets, state emergency management officials, and federal agencies responsible for EAS, including FCC and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS).

What GAO Recommends

To improve the media's ability to issue emergency alerts, GAO recommends that DHS and FCC develop a plan to verify (1) the dependability and effectiveness of the EAS relay system, and (2) that EAS participants have the training to issue effective EAS alerts. Also, DHS and FCC should establish a forum for stakeholders to address the challenges of implementing an integrated alert system. In response, DHS agreed with the intent of our recommendations. FCC provided technical comments.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-411.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Mark Goldstein at (202) 512-2834 or goldsteinm@gao.gov.

EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

Current Emergency Alert System Has Limitations, and Development of a New Integrated System Will Be Challenging

What GAO Found

According to stakeholders, the media are generally prepared to participate in EAS as required, but EAS has limitations that could affect its performance. Broadcast radio and television, cable operators, and satellite radio operators are required to participate in national EAS alerts, and satellite television will be required to participate in May 2007. Participation in state and local alerts is voluntary. While these media outlets appear generally prepared to participate, FCC has limited measures for ensuring compliance. In addition, stakeholders cited limitations, including an unreliable method for relaying national EAS messages to the public. GAO found a lack of ongoing testing of this relay method. In a national test, three primary relay stations failed, and in one state test, a state representative reported that the message was not received beyond an area roughly 50 to 70 miles from the state capital. Problems with equipment and software caused these failures, which, in a real emergency, could have prevented the public from receiving critical information. Another cited limitation was inadequate training of EAS personnel.

FEMA officials and other stakeholders told GAO that the current EAS faces a range of technical, cultural, and other challenges, such as interfacing with newer communications technologies and issuing alerts in multiple languages. FEMA said the alerting system should provide various means to reach the greatest number of people, and FCC reported that a wide-reaching public alert system is critical to the public safety. In November 2005, FCC proposed changes to improve EAS and address some of the challenges facing it. Stakeholders GAO contacted anticipated positive results from some of the potential changes, such as expanding EAS alerts to additional media, but expressed mixed views on other potential changes. For example, the emergency managers GAO contacted generally favored making the transmission of state and local alerts mandatory, whereas the broadcasters GAO interviewed expressed concern about over alerting, which they said could lead the public to ignore EAS messages.

Several efforts to develop an integrated alert system—one that would provide effective warnings over all broadcast media devices available to the public—are underway. FEMA is conducting various pilots under a public-private partnership called the Integrated Public Alert and Warning System. One such pilot, the Digital Emergency Alert System, uses the digital capabilities of the nation's public television stations to provide public alerts. Another effort, the Warning, Alert, and Response Network Act, is aimed at integrating emergency alerts and enables the participation of wireless providers in EAS. However, FEMA officials and others identified challenges to the implementation of an integrated system, including achieving cooperation among federal, state, and local emergency management organizations on the use of a standardized technology for disseminating alerts. Coordination and collaboration among a variety of stakeholders will be critical to ensure that all elements of the system can work together and produce accurate, timely alerts for all Americans.