

First responders need better communication

By Sen. Ted Stevens (R-Alaska)

Emergency personnel and first responders must be able to communicate with one another during natural disasters and other crises.

Significant progress has been made since the attacks on Sept. 11 revealed problems in our public safety communications infrastructure, but as Hurricanes Katrina and Rita demonstrated we have more work to do. Many first responders still cannot talk with one another because their radios and communications networks are not compatible.

I have been a pilot now for a long time, and when flying a plane I can talk to the tower when taking off in Alaska and communicate upon landing in another state because our system of aircraft radios is co-

ordinated nationwide. Our first responders must have this type of communications interoperability.

Co-chairman Dan Inouye (D-Hawaii) and I have been working with our colleagues on the Senate Commerce Committee to address this issue. Last month, our committee held hearings on communications interoperability and communications during disasters. Our committee is now working to improve the resources available to first responders and the interoperability of existing systems.

The public-safety community operates on 60,000 individual systems and has 3 million public-safety operators. Coordinating these systems and users is a great challenge. Achieving true interoperability will require several things, among them coordination, planning, training, expert equipment, prop-

er standards and funding.

One initiative that will improve this situation is the DTV bill our committee is working on, which will be considered later this month. This bill will set a specific date by which broadcasters will be required to turn over 24 megahertz of analog spectrum in the 700-megahertz band. A portion of this spectrum will be exclusively dedicated to interoperability.

Equipment is another area that needs our attention. Estimates on how much it will cost to acquire interoperable radio sets have been as high as \$15 billion or more. These sets are very important for police and fire departments and other first responders across the country, which have already spent \$60 billion on their communications equipment over the years. A way must be found to incorporate that legacy equipment into a new system to avoid incurring redundant costs. There may be other networking solutions that could achieve these goals and blend existing systems into an interoperable communications system.

During our hearings last month, Dr. David Boyd, the deputy director of SafeCom in the Department of Homeland Security, testified before our committee. He told us that the challenge of interoperability is a combination of technology solutions and coordination across jurisdictions. This will take the cooperation of government, industry and public-safety officials throughout the country.

Our committee is dedicated to achieving true communications interoperability, and we are doing our part to ensure those first to the scene in a crisis have the resources they need. In the reconciliation bill, we will propose to set aside \$1



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billion to provide the money needed to acquire interoperable equipment. The bill will be marked up this week in committee and considered by the Budget Committee on Oct. 25. Providing both the spectrum and the money needed to buy the radios to utilize the spectrum will be major steps forward in achieving the interoperability our first responders need.

Stevens is chairman of the Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee.