

New Commercial Mobile Alert System

FCC Consumer Facts

Background

Have you ever thought that, for emergency alerts to be distributed as quickly as possible, they should be sent to cell phones? The Federal Communications Commission (FCC), along with other federal agencies, as well as state and local emergency personnel, is working to make that possible.

What is the Commercial Mobile Alert System (CMAS)?

In response to the Warning, Alert, and Response Network (WARN) Act passed by Congress in 2006, the FCC has established the CMAS to allow wireless service providers choosing to participate to send emergency alerts as text messages to their subscribers. During 2007 and 2008 the FCC proposed and then adopted the network structure, technical requirements, and operating procedures for the CMAS. While much work has been done, the exact date that CMAS will become operational depends on many factors, and is still probably at least two years in the future.

The CMAS network will allow the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), to accept and aggregate alerts from the President of the United States, the National Weather Service (NWS), and state and local emergency operations centers, and then send the alerts over a secure interface to participating wireless providers. These participating wireless providers will then distribute the alerts to their customers. Within ten months of FEMA making the government's design specifications for this secure interface available, wireless service providers that voluntarily choose to participate in CMAS must begin development and testing of systems that will enable them to receive alerts from FEMA and distribute them to their customers.

The FCC is also requiring public TV stations to act as an extra distribution system for CMAS alerts. Within 18 months of receiving funding from the Department of Commerce, all public TV stations must install equipment and technologies at their digital TV transmitters to enable them to receive CMAS alerts from FEMA and transmit them to participating wireless service providers.

How Will Wireless Service Providers Send Alerts?

Participating wireless service providers must be able to target alerts to individual counties, and ensure that alerts reach customers roaming outside a provider's service area. Participating providers must also transmit alerts with a dedicated vibration cadence and audio attention signal to ensure the alerts reach wireless customers with hearing or vision disabilities. Emergency alerts will not interrupt calls in progress. While the FCC currently is requiring only text-based alerts with a maximum displayable message size of 90 characters, CMAS may include audio and video alerts in the future. Similarly, the FCC currently is requiring that alerts be provided only in English, but is assessing whether foreign language alerts can also be provided.

For purposes of CMAS, emergency alerts will be classified in one of three categories:

- **Presidential Alerts** – Alerts for all Americans related to national emergencies, such as terrorist attacks, that will preempt any other pending alerts;
- **Imminent Threat Alerts** – Alerts with information on emergencies, such as hurricanes or tornadoes, where life or property is at risk, the event is likely to occur, and some responsive action should be taken; and
- **Child Abduction Emergency/AMBER Alerts** – Alerts related to missing or endangered children due to an abduction or runaway situation. (More)

→



How Will I Know Whether My Wireless Service Provider Will Send Alerts?

The FCC is requiring wireless service providers to individually notify existing customers and post signs for prospective customers if the providers will not be participating in CMAS, in whole or in part. Don't look for these notices soon, however, because providers aren't required to provide them until 60 days after the FCC announces that the capability to transmit mobile alerts is available. This availability depends on many factors, but is not likely to occur for at least two years.

Wireless service providers that decide not to send CMAS alerts to all or some of their customers must provide clear and conspicuous notice at the point of sale, including stores, kiosks, third party reseller locations, and Web sites, where the wireless provider's devices and services are marketed or sold. A wireless service provider participating *in part* in CMAS must provide, at a minimum, the following notice:

Notice Regarding Transmission of
Wireless Emergency Alerts
(Commercial Mobile Alert Service)

(Name of provider) has chosen to offer wireless emergency alerts within portions of its service areas, as defined by the terms and conditions of its service agreement, on wireless emergency alert capable devices. There is no additional charge for these wireless emergency alerts.

Wireless emergency alerts may not be available on all devices or in the entire service area, or if a subscriber is outside of (name of provider's) service area. For details on the availability of this service and wireless emergency capable devices, please ask a sales representative, or go to (provider's Web site address).

Notice required by FCC Rule 47
C.F.R. § 10.240 (Commercial Mobile
Alert Service).

How Will I Know Whether My Wireless Service Provider Will Send Alerts? (cont'd.)

A wireless service provider choosing not to participate in CMAS *at all* must provide, at a minimum, the following notice:

NOTICE TO NEW AND EXISTING
SUBSCRIBERS REGARDING
TRANSMISSION OF WIRELESS
EMERGENCY ALERTS

(Name of provider) presently does not transmit wireless emergency alerts.

Notice required by FCC Rule 47
C.F.R. § 10.240 (Commercial Mobile
Alert Service).

A wireless service provider deciding not to participate in CMAS, in whole or in part, must notify existing subscribers by an announcement amending the existing subscriber's service agreement. The announcement may be sent by any means that providers typically use to communicate with their subscribers, including direct mailing, bill insert, or other notification, and must contain the applicable language quoted above. Pre-paid customers can be sent a text message or SMS (short message service).

Wireless service providers had to notify the FCC by September 8, 2008, regarding whether or not they will participate in CMAS. If wireless service providers decide to participate in CMAS after this date, they must notify the FCC 30 days before offering the service to their customers. So far, most major wireless service providers have told the FCC they will participate, although some have indicated they may not be able to provide alerts to all customers immediately after CMAS starts operation. More smaller providers may decide to participate later when all technical issues are resolved and they can better determine their costs.

If, after notifying the FCC that it will participate, a wireless service provider decides not to send alerts, it must notify its subscribers and the FCC at least 60 days before withdrawing its decision to

(More)
→



How Will I Know Whether My Wireless Service Provider Will Send Alerts? (cont'd.)

participate. Providers that withdraw from CMAS must allow their subscribers to terminate service without any payment of an early termination fee or other penalty. Withdrawing providers also must individually notify their subscribers of this right in clear and conspicuous language.

What if I Don't Want to Receive Wireless Emergency Alerts?

You can opt out of receiving Imminent Threat and Child Abduction/AMBER alerts, but not Presidential Alerts. Therefore, if your provider participates, even if you opt out, you will still receive Presidential Alerts containing information about the most serious threats. Your provider may not bill you a fee per message for alerts you receive, but may factor the cost of participating in CMAS into its overall service charge. When CMAS becomes operational, your provider will let you know how to opt out if you choose to do so.

For More Information

For information about other telecommunications issues, visit the FCC's Consumer & Governmental Affairs Bureau Web site at www.fcc.gov/cgb, or contact the FCC's Consumer Center by e-mailing fccinfo@fcc.gov; calling 1-888-CALL-FCC (1-888-225-5322) voice or 1-888-TELL-FCC (1-888-835-5322) TTY; faxing 1-866-418-0232; or writing to:

Federal Communications Commission
Consumer & Governmental Affairs Bureau
Consumer Inquiries and Complaints Division
445 12th Street, SW
Washington, DC 20554.

###

For this or any other consumer publication in an accessible format (electronic ASCII text, Braille, large print, or audio) please write or call us at the address or phone number below, or send an e-mail to FCC504@fcc.gov.

To receive information on this and other FCC consumer topics through the Commission's electronic subscriber service, visit www.fcc.gov/cgb/contacts/.

This document is for consumer education purposes only and is not intended to affect any proceedings or cases involving this subject matter or related issues.

09/19/08

