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Published on *Security Management* (http://www.securitymanagement.com)

Interoperable Communications Technologies Need Uniform Testing Standards, Official Says

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Created *05/27/2010 - 12:32*

The lack of a uniform product testing program for emergency communications equipment means first responders could buy radios they believe are interoperable but fail to deliver during a disaster, a government official told Congress today.

Dereck Orr, program manager for public safety communications standards at the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), told the House Subcommittee on Technology and Innovation [1] that unlike other wireless technologies, such as Bluetooth and Wi-Fi, public safety radio manufacturers have not created a "formal and uniform compliance assessment and certification program" to ensure they followed the standards correctly and that interoperability was achieved.

(For more on interoperability standards, see "Interoperability Standards Stalled [2]?" from the August 2007 issue of Security Management.)

Under Project 25, or P25, public safety radio and systems manufacturers and the federal government have worked together to create standards that ensure different companies' radios purchased by different agencies can communicate with each other during large emergency responses. While interoperable standards have been in development since 1989, tragedies like 9-11 and Hurricane Katrina—and the specter of something similar or worse—has made achieving them more urgent.

But manufacturers, Orr said, have used the standards to sell their products without ensuring they actually achieve interoperability. "The P25 logo has instead been used by manufacturers as a marketing logo to convey to users that their product was developed to P25 standards specifications," Orr said. "However, many public safety agencies that we speak with incorrectly assume that the logo is a certification stamp signifying the completion of a formal and uniform test regime."

Past testing has also demonstrated that products advertised as P25-compliant were not, said Dr. David G. Boyd of the Department of Homeland Security's Science and Technology Directorate.

"A few years ago, it was discovered through testing that much of the equipment advertised as P25-compliant was unable to interoperate with P25 equipment manufactured by other companies, and, in some cases, even with earlier P25 equipment manufactured by the same company," he testified.

John Muench, director of business development for Motorola, which manufactures P25 equipment, however, said that lack of interoperability may not be the fault of manufacturers but that of users if they do not configure the technology correctly.

To help industry ensure their emergency radio products are interoperable and increase first-responder confidence in those products, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in coordination with NIST established the P25 Compliance Assessment Program (P25 CAP). Under the program, manufacturers voluntarily test their products in a DHS-certified laboratory and then post their test results on a Web site called the Responder Knowledge Base that public safety agencies can access.

"For the first time, public safety officials have one place that they can go to obtain test results performed through a formal process and who results are presented in a common manner, making comparisons between manufacturers' products much less time consuming," said Orr.

Subcommittee Chairman David Wu (D-OR) said he approves of P25 CAP but added that it must instill confidence in public safety agencies that spend millions of dollars on equipment. "A compliance assessment process signals to the purchaser that a product meets all of the requirements of a standard," he said . "Any laptop with a Wi-Fi logo, or any toaster with an Underwriter's Laboratory sticker, had to go through testing and certification to be able to display those marks." Public safety equipment should too, he said.

In November 2009, DHS took a step toward fulfilling that role, mandating that public safety agencies receiving federal money could only buy P25 CAP-validated products under the 2010 SAFECOM grant guidance (.pdf) [3]. The program, however, needs buy-in from public safety agencies for the standard to be effective. Currently, only four manufacturers comply with the P25 CAP testing program—Motorola being one of them [4]—according to Orr.

Despite low participation in the P25 CAP program, neither Orr nor Boyd want to impose standards similar to Europe's TETRA model, which mandates formal testing of public safety radio equipment. Both the government and private sector witnesses said the European Union's standards are expensive and onerous.

Much of the hearing was devoted to explaining the complexity of interoperable emergency communication systems to frequently confused subcommittee members. Which left members of Congress agreeing with Chief Jeffrey D. Johnson of the International Association of Fire Chiefs when he said, "We in the fire service are not so much interested about how radios and systems work, but that they work."

♦ Photos of radios by brettneilson/Flickr [5]

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