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RADIO VENDORS HEAR PUBLIC SAFETY'S CRY

Apr 1, 2008 12:00 PM, By Mary Rose Roberts & Glenn Bischoff

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Science and Technology (S&T) Directorate demonstrated a Project 25 multiband radio capable of supporting multiple public safety frequency bands last month at the 2008 International Wireless Communications Expo.

Thales Communications was awarded a \$6.275 million contract to develop the radio so federal, state and local first responders could communicate across frequency bands during a disaster. According to Dr. David Boyd, director of the S&T's Command, Control and Interoperability Division, the directorate wanted to collaborate with a vendor to develop a radio that could operate across the 10 critical frequency bands used by first-responder agencies. In addition, federal officials sought a technology that matched the current market price for handheld radios but would perform like multiple radios, letting command-and-control operators use a single radio to communicate to another agency operating on a separate frequency.

The software-defined radio, dubbed the Thales Liberty, communicates with radios that operate in the 136-174 MHz, 360-400 MHz, 402-420 MHz, 450-512 MHz, 700 MHz and 800 MHz frequencies. It also is compatible with analog FM systems, Boyd said. By operating across frequencies, users will be able to talk to multiple agencies. Users simply turn a switch on the radio to the particular frequency and can send and receive messages from radios on any of the aforementioned federal, state or local channels, he said.

Although the radio currently is being field-tested by DHS and public safety agencies, Stephen Nicholas, marketing communications manager for Thales, said he expects it to be available in 2009 at \$4000 to \$6000 per device. All Thales products are metal-cased and submersible; however, the radio currently doesn't meet full military specifications.

Pilot programs among the DHS, Thales and willing public safety agencies will determine the outcome of the final product, Nicholas said.

"There is no public safety agency whom we've talked to that doesn't want to pilot this in their backyard," Boyd said, "so we will define the pilots that really ring out the system. We want to put it in the toughest possible environment to demonstrate what it can do."

Thales isn't the only radio vendor that has been working on a multiband product. A couple of weeks prior to the DHS/Thales demonstration, Harris introduced a portable radio for the first-responder sector that operates in both VHF (low- and high-band) and UHF (low- and high-band) modes. The company is targeting the federal level first, but said it expects to eventually introduce models for state and local agencies.

The RF-1033M is an offshoot of multiband radios that Harris has been producing for the military sector during the last decade. While multiband radios have been available to amateur radio operators for years, they haven't delivered the ruggedness and features required by first responders, said Matt Fallows, product manager for Harris.

"I don't believe that multiband technology has been put together in a package that does things like support APCO Project 25. Ham radios are not necessarily intended for a professional market," Fallows said, adding that the RF-1033M supports P25 and enables AES and DES encryption.

Ben Holycross, radio communications manager for Polk County, Fla. — a vocal advocate for the development of multiband radios for the public safety sector — said Harris' introduction means vendors finally are paying heed to public safety's cry for multiband products. "We're starting to get the manufacturers' attention that [interoperability] is a problem area that needs to be fixed," Holycross said.

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