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EAS Goes Digital
Mandatory Emergency Alert rules applied to digital broadcasters
But FCC mulls application of the emergency system to wireless carriers

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In this new era of homeland insecurity, the government is doing what it can to maximize its ability to alert the public to emergency situations. So it is not surprising that the FCC recently announced that it is extending the reach of its Emergency Alert System (EAS) rules to include digital television (DTV), digital cable television, direct broadcast satellite television (DBS), digital radio (DAB or IBOC), and satellite radio (SDARS) in national EAS activations. Currently, EAS rules only require the participation of terrestrial analog television, terrestrial analog radio, analog cable systems, and terrestrial wireless cable systems in national EAS alerts.

Digital and satellite programming providers must begin participating in national EAS alerts by December 31, 2006, with direct broadcast satellite television given until May 31, 2007 to participate. Participation in state and local EAS activations will for the time being remain voluntary for all broadcasters and programming providers. If digital and satellite providers choose to transmit state and local EAS messages, they must comply with FCC EAS rules governing those messages, as terrestrial analog providers must do currently.

The Commission has had EAS in its sights for more than a year, with possible actions ranging from tweaks to comprehensive overhaul to replacement by some more advanced warning system involving new technologies. The Commission sought comment last year on whether cellular carriers should be required to participate in the EAS system. While the Commission has now determined that EAS should remain an important component of any future alert and warning system and has now extended EAS participation to digital and satellite programming providers, it simply punted on whether to extend the EAS concept to non-mass media entities.

Instead, the FCC issued a Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking seeking comment on all issues relating to a next generation alert and warning system and the role the FCC should take in developing such a system. Several issues which the FCC has placed on the table for discussion reach over the mass media/common carrier divide:

- (i) Should the FCC require wireless carriers to provide emergency alerts and warnings? Which distribution models and technologies can be used for wireless alert and warning? Would these models and technologies permit use of a common messaging protocol? Would they require customers to replace their current handsets?

Should traditional telephone companies competing with cable television service providers and DTV broadcasters in delivering digital content through fiber optic connections be required to transmit emergency alerts and warnings?

(ii) Common Protocols: For a digitally-based system to be distributed simultaneously over multiple platforms, must a common messaging protocol be adopted? Should the Common Alerting Protocol (CAP), endorsed by many public and private organizations responsible for emergency alerts, be adopted? Would a CAP allow simultaneous distribution to radio, television, and wireless media such as mobile telephones and PDAs?

These issues will obviously be of concern to wireless and wireline carriers alike as they consider how mass dissemination of emergency announcements can be made over systems engineered and scaled for non-broadcast operation. The Commission is obviously looking far into the future, with an eye toward developing an emergency alert system which makes the most effective and timely use of all available communications technologies to bring emergency information to the public. The deadlines for comments and reply comments had not been established at press time, but it is likely that those deadlines will fall in early 2006.