

Waiting for Disaster to Strike

THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION IS DRAGGING ITS FEET ON PUBLIC SAFETY COMMUNICATIONS.



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States and cities have finally said *uncle*. The Louisiana Department of Public Safety has been on the point of the spear.

The current state of disarray in which the Bush administration allows emergency communications among first responders to languish is testament to the triumph of special interests and bureaucracy over the welfare of this country's citizens and business communities.

First, the linkage of cellular carriers' customer location data for e911 calls to Public Service Answering Points is incomplete. It's over a year since the Phase II "deadline" (Dec. 31, 2005) has passed. Where is the FCC?

Second, the Department of Homeland Security has failed to adequately fund Project 25 (P25) standard trunked radios. Adopted in August 1995, the user-defined P25 standard allows legacy wireless radio equipment used by police, fire and emergency response, both digital and analog, to interoperate at municipal, state and federal levels. Four years after Sept. 11, 2001, when police and fire radios could not communicate with each other in the World Trade Center towers, it took Hurricane Katrina for Louisiana to get funding to achieve state coverage with fully interoperable P25 radios.

Third, we have delays in the so-called "800 MHz re-banding" program, in which Nextel moved over to 1900 MHz spectrum and funded the migration of public safety users to the lower 700 MHz band with its better building penetration. Not only did the FCC fail to allow adequate time for municipal users' capital budget reviews and purchase processes for new radios, but it has failed to enforce migration of TV stations in the 700 MHz frequencies by end of 2006, putting planned migrations of first responders years behind schedule.

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on the point of the spear. After Katrina, it engaged Orbital Data Net to develop an all-satellite disaster solution. As Orbital CEO Greg Heifner points out: "After Hurricane Katrina, Louisiana's P25 system had sites down for weeks because many of the T-1 lines connecting radio towers to the hub in Baton Rouge had been uprooted by trees. We adapted to the legacy public safety infrastructure by installing mobile systems that provide T-1 connection on a satellite channel with low latency acceptable to the P25 network. In the cities, we installed small satellite antennas—one man can lift one—since tractor trailer-mounted mobile satellite uplinks could not get into an area with roads out, flooding and downed trees."

Finally, lack of spectrum limits satellite phones as an option for emergency communications. In the days after Katrina, media companies quickly consumed all available satellite bandwidth that public safety agencies needed in Louisiana, rendering their phones useless. On Sept. 11, 1996, the Public Safety Wireless Advisory Committee released its final report recommending almost 100 MHz of public safety spectrum. Yet recent private sector calls to place spectrum in public safety broadband trusts have been turned down by the FCC and are now being pitched directly to Congress.

During recent hearings before the Senate Commerce Committee, Steve Largent, president of CTIA, the cellular carrier's lobbyist, testified that "this is not about spectrum." Firefighters and police associations backing Cyren Call's proposal for spectrum to be commercially developed but reserved for public safety use disagree. For the first time since Sept. 11, 2001, the battle for a national public safety network has been joined. Stay tuned. //

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