

**MIKE WOMACK
MEMBER OF THE NATIONAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT ASSOCIATION
AND MISSISSIPPI EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY DIRECTOR**

**TESTIMONY
BEFORE THE**

**HOUSE TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT,
PUBLIC BUILDINGS, AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT**

ON

**ASSURING PUBLIC ALERT SYSTEMS WORK TO WARN AMERICAN CITIZENS OF NATURAL OR
TERRORIST DISASTERS**

THE UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

JUNE 4, 2008

INTRODUCTION

Thank you Chairwoman Norton, Ranking Member Graves, and distinguished members of the Committee for allowing me the opportunity to provide you with a statement for the record on our nation's preparedness. I am Mike Womack, the Director of the Mississippi Emergency Management Agency. In my statement, I am representing the National Emergency Management Association (NEMA), whose members are the state directors of emergency management in the states, territories, and the District of Columbia. My tenure with MEMA began in 2002 and I served as Director of Response and Recovery and Deputy Director, leading up to my appointment as the Director in December 2006. I bring more than 29 years of experience in active and reserve military service, retiring in June 2001 as a Lieutenant Colonel from the Mississippi Army National Guard with an extensive operations management background. I have served in numerous positions including Administrative Officer, Operations Officer, Intelligence Officer, Civil Affairs Officer and Chief of Staff of a 5,000-soldier armor brigade.

There are several key areas that I wish to discuss with you today related to improving our alert and warning systems:

1. The current organization structure for public alert and warning works well, but more federal utilization of the system is necessary;
2. Mississippi's experience with the Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS) Gulf Coast Pilot Program was good, but more federal support is needed to complete the pilot;
3. Key components of the Executive Order on Alert and Warning need to be finalized; and
4. Legislation to implement the Executive Order and to provide statutory authority for the current practice could be helpful to moving the national effort forward provided there is coordination with state and local government stakeholders as the system is developed.

Alert and warning systems are a valuable tool for state emergency managers to prepare and respond to disasters. Alert systems serve to make sure citizens are aware of disasters and can take steps to get out of harm's way. Alert and warning is not just a rural issue or an urban issue. The capability is needed by every single jurisdiction, no matter what their threats and risks are for disasters. State and local governments are the primary authorities for alert and warnings, rather than the federal government. Alert systems are a component of the state's emergency operations plan in disaster preparedness and response operations to deliver timely and accurate messages out to citizens for everything from a hazardous materials incident, sheltering in place, evacuation orders, and distribution locations for key commodities such as ice and water after a disaster. While local governments serve as the primary authority, in some cases states find it necessary to expand capabilities to ensure system-wide coverage. Many states have developed state-wide emergency alert and warning systems to ensure coordinated information and messages to citizens, the private sector, and local government partners in times of disaster. NEMA's Preparedness Committee has been active in coordinating with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the National Weather Service (NWS) on warning issues for many years. Alert and warning dates back long before the advent of the Emergency Alert System (EAS) and the precursor Emergency Broadcast System (EBS), the system was a central government function to protect national security interests. Our nation

now has local systems employing a wide variety of technologies and equipment: various sirens, outdoor alert and warning systems, reverse 911, blast e-mails, and some text messaging systems. These various components result in a patchwork system often based on a community's ability to afford the technology to warn citizens. There is no one system that covers all of the public. Federal, state, and local cooperation are essential to serve as the backstop for when local systems and subsequent state systems are unable to meet challenges in getting the message out.

The current organizational structure for alert and warning in the federal government works and there is no reason for radical change. The National Weather Service's NOAA Weather Radio is a known resource tool for both emergency management and citizens in preparing for disasters. The NOAA Weather Radio system works very well and has brand name appeal. The Federal Emergency Management Agency is the right place for IPAWS, as the nation's all hazards emergency management coordination point. While the National Alert and Warning System (NAWAS) exists, the tool is seldom, if ever, used. During the 9/11 terrorist attacks, NAWAS would have been an excellent conduit to coordinate information to state emergency operations centers. Stronger federal collaboration is necessary though for the National Weather Service, FEMA, and the Federal Communications Commission on alert and warning issues. Our national tools are supplements to local networks that utilize a wide variety of technologies and methodologies. Common alerting protocols are necessary to integrate all of the federal, state, and local systems, but any standards must be coordinated with all partners. States are also interested in seeing continued efforts with new technologies and supports continued or increased financial investments for technology development. The main problem is that we have federal alert and warning systems, but we do not utilize them for whatever reason – it may be lack of coordination, lack of understanding of the system, or lack of time to act. However, the lack of use of the system in emergencies can be fixed and addressed, and must be accomplished with a partnership of all levels of government.

Mississippi has been participating in the Gulf Coast Pilot Program for IPAWS and we found the system to be an important component in the tool box for state and local emergency managers to get the warnings out. Overall, our experience in Mississippi has been good, but there were certainly challenges with the pilot. We used MyStateUSA as the technological support for Mississippi's mass notification. The Deaf Link portion of the pilot worked very well. We also used the reverse 911 system in coordination with the Governor, by using his voice to record critical emergency messages. Our citizens found this as an authoritative source, but reverse 911 will not reach the entire population. Citizens will not answer calls if they are not home or if they do not recognize the numbers, also many citizens rely solely on mobile telecommunications now instead of traditional land-line phones. Of the four times we used the system (on 8/18/2007, 8/28/2007, 9/19/2007, and 9/20/2007), Mississippi had an average of: 42 percent of the calls answered live; 32 percent answered utilizing an answering machine; and 26 percent were unsuccessful. Mississippi found the system very valuable; however redundancy is necessary in the system. Reverse 911 works for long notice events, but it still takes hours to get the calls out since there are only so many circuits in the system. For the third part of the pilot, digital EAS never worked well and just when bugs in the system were identified funding was pulled by FEMA. The short notice of the program's cancelation created a very expensive program that was totally unfunded for state and local use. IPAWS must be adequately funded over a two year period to be fully implemented, tested, and updated to reflect the tests. IPAWS should exist as only part of the system, as no entity should have a sole communications system for warning and alert. Nationally, we need to better define what IPAWS is meant to accomplish and establish that local short warning and immediate systems are the first line of defense for warning.

In June 2006, the President issued Executive Order 13407 on Public Alert and Warning that designates the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) as the lead for alert and warning and the federal coordination point. Along with requirements for the development of a standard alert and protocol system, DHS is also charged with adapting alerts based on geographic

locations and risks. DHS is also responsible for coordinating public education, including state, territorial, tribal, and local governments, and ensuring that these stakeholders understand how to utilize and access systems. Key initiatives related to the Executive Order have yet to be implemented, including the development of a comprehensive national alerting capability and administration of a national text messaging network for alert and warning.

Last month, Ranking Member Graves introduced H.R. 6038 to direct the President to modernize the integrated public alert and warning system. The Integrated Public Alert and Warning System Act provides the statutory, legal framework for essentially implementing Executive Order 13407 and specifically designates FEMA as the lead agency responsible for accomplishing the tasks related to modernization of the public alert and warning system. The legislation calls for more detailed reports on pilot programs, which will be helpful to Congress and stakeholders in tracking the progress on the system's improvements and the move to a more fully developed national system. We would ask that consideration be given to requiring FEMA to coordinate more with state and local governments as the implementation plan is developed for the system and improvements are made. NEMA also appreciates that the legislation holds harmless the Department of Commerce, including NOAA Weather Radio, as we believe this system works well.

CONCLUSION

We appreciate Congress' increased attention and focus on disaster alert and warning systems. Federal efforts for alert and warning must be coordinated in order to provide state governments with a valuable tool for preparing citizens during times of disaster. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of NEMA.