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Testimony Before FCC Regional Hearing
March 7, 2006
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Jackson, Mississippi

Hurricane Katrina, on August 29th 2005, is said to have been the worst natural disaster in our country's history. Looking at the devastation in our state and in neighboring states we can agree with that statement.

When most residents of America hear about Mississippi they think of a rural state with not much of a population base. However the population of the Mississippi Gulf Coast is close to the population of the city of New Orleans. The 2003 census information put the population along the Mississippi Gulf Coast at 411,000. While the population of the city of New Orleans was slightly higher than 484,000.

While the Mississippi Gulf Coast has not gotten the media attention of New Orleans I think the numbers show that we do have a large population base which has a great need to be informed prior to and after a major catastrophe.

You will be glad to hear that Mississippi broadcasters, both television and radio, did an outstanding job. In several cases, the broadcasters put their lives on the line in order to make sure the viewing or listening public had the necessary information to weather the storm.

There were some problems that I would like to address today for you and others to consider whether there might be some national help to address these concerns.

But first let me talk about the amazing job broadcasters did.

At my own television station, WLOX-TV in Biloxi, Mississippi we started our around the clock coverage early on Sunday morning. That coverage lasted for twelve straight days. We never went off the air, except for a few hours the week after the storm, when a water heater blew up on our generator in McHenry, Mississippi.

Then we were able to partner with WXXV, a Fox affiliate in Gulfport, Mississippi which carried our signal until we could get back on the air.

I am proud of the media on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Four radio media groups, WLOX and the Sun Herald, a local newspaper, joined forces in providing information to the public. The four media groups, Triad, Gulf Coast Radio Group, Clear Channel and WOSM all joined forces in carrying the news product of WLOX.

By using the news from the TV station and the signal of the four radio groups we were able to keep the Mississippi Gulf Coast informed on emergency messages residents needed to hear before and after the storm.

We received many letters and calls following the storm saying that if they had not been able to receive our signal during the storm they do not believe they would have been able to make it.

3/14/2006

At WLOX we experienced heavy damage from Hurricane Katrina. We lost our sales office when a tower fell, pulling a guy point out of the ground and tossing the ten ton piece of concrete on top of our building. Thank goodness no one was in that part of the station during the storm as they would have no doubt been seriously injured.

During the height of the storm the roof over our newsroom peeled away. We had to quickly move computers and other valuable equipment while we were still on the air. While our newsroom still had walls, it was not usable during and following the storm because of falling sheetrock and ceiling tiles. As of today we are in a make shift newsroom. We hope to finish the repairs by May of this year.

After our newsroom was damaged we all evacuated to a hallway where we kept broadcasting the latest radar maps and still took calls from viewers as long as we could. We operated for several hours out of this hallway.

Around three o'clock on that Monday afternoon we moved back to the studio even though the adjoining newsroom lacked a roof.

During the next two weeks, our staff did remarkable work. Working twelve hour shifts our 50 employees at the station kept broadcasting on our air waves and also to our radio partners.

Also, our parent company at the time, Liberty Broadcasting did a tremendous job in bringing in supplies on Tuesday morning to make sure we were able to continue broadcasting.

While we were struggling to keep operations going at our broadcast facility, our bureau reporters in Hancock and Jackson County were experiencing an even tougher time. Al Showers was at the EOC Center in Bay St. Louis. The water got so high outside the EOC center that the employees at the emergency center wrote numbers on their arms and then put the numbers and names up high in the building, in case they did not make it.

Our bureau in Bay St. Louis was completely destroyed. We lost our car, editing equipment, transmitting equipment. The only thing we saved was a camera which Al had with him.

In Pascagoula, we had a similar fate. We lost a car which was parked outside the EOC Center when the storm surge came ashore.

WRJW in Picayune, Mississippi went off the air for several hours after the hurricane force winds raked Pearl River County. However, having a standing tower, after the storm, they were determined to get back on the air as soon as possible.

They borrowed a generator from the manager of the radio station and were able to get back on the air by Tuesday night. Fuel became a big problem for them as there were no service stations operating. They literally drained the gas from their station van to keep their generator running for ten hours.

The station had to go to Kentucky to find a larger generator and adequate fuel to run their generator.

The station was the life blood of information for the Picayune area. The parking lot was full of folks needing to get information out. They included the local police, county sheriff department, emergency management personnel, FEMA, Red Cross and other emergency management personnel. The manager of the radio station said if it had not been for gasoline they begged from listeners they would have been off the air in less than 24 hours.

Delores Wood , WRJW manager wrote the State Broadcasters Association that, “This incredible experience should point out the importance of hometown radio stations and their needs during a crisis. If things had been any worse, I’m not sure we could have handled it. And, I know we would have done a better job if we had been able to go full power right away.”

In Jackson, our capitol city, all three television stations were able to continue broadcasting with back up generators. WLBT the NBC affiliate in Jackson used its helicopter to provide the first aerial look at the damaged areas. WLBT also used its helicopter to fly medical and other supplies to hard to get to areas.

Other radio and television broadcasters in Mississippi also were there for their communities. Some lost power for a few hours or days. But as soon as they could get back on the air they did and let the public know what was happening in their community.

Some radio stations were able to operate only at half power because of the problem of attaining enough fuel for generators to run transmitters at full power.

I think you can see Mississippi Broadcasters rose to the challenge. No doubt it was the biggest challenge they had ever faced in their broadcasting career.

Now let me talk about things that could have gone better for our state broadcasters. Fuel was no doubt the biggest problem facing our state broadcasters.

Along the Coast, MDOT attempted to confiscate fuel from both WXXV and WLOX. WLOX had brought fuel in from Lake Charles, Louisiana and had filled up our generator at the station and also shared some with the Sun Herald Newspaper across the street from us.

There was still a thousand gallons left in the tanker truck. The management of WLOX asked Colonel Joe Spraggins the local EOC director if he could use the fuel and he asked us to take it to the county barn. We were on our way out there with the fuel when a MDOT representative stopped the truck and ordered it to go to the same place we were taking it.

Jackie Lett the Executive Director of the Mississippi Broadcasters helped to arrange a fuel truck to come in and provide diesel fuel for WXXV. However the tanker was only able to off load one thousand of the three gallons of diesel fuel before it was confiscated. Another fuel run was attempted but once again the tanker was confiscated so fuel never was delivered to WXXV.

This was fuel that the individual stations had gone out on the open market and purchased in order to keep their generators running. It was not fuel being supplied by a state or federal agency.

I hope you agree that Broadcasters are First Responders and are just as entitled to their own fuel as other first responders such as Highway Patrol, sheriff officers or city police officers. Without this fuel there is no way the public will ever know what is going on.

Broadcasters must be recognized as First Responders in subsequent disasters or communication is going to come to a stand still and the public will be harmed because they did not receive vital information. Whether this is a state or federal issue is immaterial to me and I am sure other broadcasters. I hope if anything comes out of these hearings it is that the FCC and other federal agencies will designate broadcasters as First Responders.

Charles Dowdy the General Manager of WAKH, WAZA, WAKK, WAPF and WFCG in McComb,

Mississippi said the biggest issue for them after the storm was fuel for generators and vehicles. Local officials offered to give them small amounts but it was not enough to keep them on the air. They organized trips to North Mississippi every other day to bring back several hundred gallons on each trip.

At WDAM Television station in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, the Chief Engineer, Jim Wilkinson told the state broadcasters association, "I'm still not certain what the problem was getting diesel. Pine Belt Oil supplies us and said there would be no problem getting more, then told us FEMA had clamped down on who was able to get fuel. We were told we need a FEMA Certificate; then we were told we don't need a certificate. FEMA took over the Collins facility, no they didn't. This kind of misinformation was the single biggest headache of the entire situation. If anything needs to be addressed statewide this is it."

Stuart Kellogg, the General Manager of WAPT-TV in Jackson said they had to hustle across three states to keep the generator supplied. WAPT tried to get an emergency letter from MEMA for diesel and gas but they had no luck.

Many of the smaller broadcast companies in Mississippi according to a report put together by the Mississippi Association of Broadcasters, do not have a generator. They were off for a few hours to days depending on when power was restored in their area.

Some type of program that would allow broadcasters to buy generators at a nominal cost would certainly help them in future storms that might affect their communities.

As you have heard several broadcast companies in Mississippi tried to get a letter from state and federal agencies to guarantee fuel shipments but that never happened. It would be good if in the future gas shipments to broadcasters could have some type of placard on board to indicate the fuel was going to a broadcaster and should not be confiscated.

Communication was non existent immediately following the storm. Cell phones and regular phone service did not work for the first couple of days. WLOX was lucky to have a Ham Operator stationed at our studio. The Harrison County EOC office sent the person to work with us.

Without the use of the Ham Operator it probably would have been a couple of days before we would have known whether the persons in our two bureaus had survived the storm.

Monday night, after the worst of the storm had passed we were able to contact the EOC's at the three coastal counties and find out some information that we were able to put on the air.

For example, we were told where persons should go the next day for kidney dialysis. It was vital to get this information out as dialysis patients would have become ill within days without the proper treatment.

The Ham Operator was able to transit vital information between agencies located at the EOC centers and WLOX. Without this link we would not have had any way to communicate with officials along the coast.

We did have two satellite phones and we were able to call long distance but we were not able to use them to make any local calls. They were great in letting our home office know that we were all alive.

In the future if any radio system is designed for civil defense it would be my hope that the media would also have some access to the technology so we would be able to communicate with emergency officials.

In the case of WLOX we are on a main feeder line for Mississippi Power so we had our power restored at the station in about five days. However, in other cases where a station is not on a major feeder line, it still would be good for the station to have a high priority so it could get back on the air as soon as possible. This would be especially true in some of our rural areas.

Finally I understand there are FEMA cards that are given out to the news media but as far as I know, this did not happen on the coast. We do have our own press cards provided by the local EOC office and they enabled us to move around freely.

However, when you go from county to county sometimes they might not be honored. Therefore it might be good if a central card either issued by a state or federal agency would be provided to the station. This would be needed not only for the news folks but also for the other support departments such as engineering and operation.

In closing, Mississippi Broadcasters did a terrific job. No doubt many lives were saved by the warnings put out by broadcasters in our state.

Hopefully some of the things we experienced will help others be even better prepared for next major catastrophe.

We appreciate you coming to Jackson and allowing the Mississippi Broadcasters to testify before this important committee.

I would be glad to answer any questions.