

Nationwide EAS Test FAQs

Updated November 4, 2011

What is the EAS?

The Emergency Alert System (EAS) is a media communications-based alerting system that is designed to transmit emergency alerts and warnings to the American public at the national, state and local levels. The EAS has been in existence since 1994, and its precursor, the Emergency Broadcast System (EBS), began in 1963. Television and radio broadcasters, satellite radio and satellite television providers, as well as cable television and wireline video providers all participate in the system (collectively, EAS Participants). EAS Participants broadcast thousands of alerts and warnings to the American public each year regarding weather threats, child abductions, and many other types of emergencies. As such, the EAS will continue to function as one key component of a national alert and warning system that will provide alerts over multiple communications platforms, including mobile communications devices.

How does the EAS work?

An EAS alert is based on an audio protocol defined in the FCC's rules. In the EAS, an alert originator at the local, state, or national level inputs an EAS alert into the system using specific encoding equipment. Specially designated stations then broadcast this alert to the public in their listening areas. Other EAS Participants (television and other radio broadcasters, cable and wireline video service providers, radio and television satellite service providers, and others) monitor the specially-designated stations for EAS alerts. When these other EAS Participants receive the EAS alert, they, in turn, broadcast it to the public in their listening areas. This group of EAS Participants may be monitored by other EAS Participants too far away to receive the EAS message from the first group of transmitting broadcasters. This next group of EAS Participants, in turn, broadcasts the alert to the public in the vicinity of their stations, as well as to any other stations that may be monitoring them.

When is the EAS used? When would a national EAS alert be sent?

The EAS alerting architecture is frequently used by state and local emergency managers to send alerts to the public about emergencies and weather events. While the requirements for carrying a national-level EAS alert differ in some respects from state and local alerts, the national EAS test will test the underlying architecture that also supports state and local alerting. Ensuring that the EAS architecture functions properly will benefit emergency alerting at all levels of government.

The EAS provides the ability to send messages regionally or nationally, though it has never been activated at these levels. But a major disaster like an earthquake or tsunami could necessitate the use of the EAS on a regional or national basis to send life-saving information to the public. We cannot anticipate which communications infrastructure will withstand a particular disaster, but the EAS is one of the tools we have to send alerts, warnings, and information to the American people. The national EAS test will help us improve its capabilities should it ever be needed at the regional or national level in an actual emergency.

Why do we need a nationwide test of the EAS?

FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
Public Safety & Homeland Security Bureau

Pursuant to the FCC's rules, local and state components of the EAS are tested on a weekly and monthly basis, respectively. Although the EAS has been in existence for over 15 years, there has never been an end-to-end, nationwide test of the system, and we need to know that the system will work as intended should public safety officials ever need to send an alert or warning to a large region of the United States. Only a top-down, simultaneous test of all components of the EAS can provide an appropriate diagnosis of system-wide performance.

How will the nationwide EAS test be conducted?

The nationwide EAS test will be conducted jointly by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) through its Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) National Weather Service (NWS), the three federal agencies that have EAS management responsibilities. FEMA is the arm of the DHS primarily responsible for developing national alert and warning functions. The FCC is an independent agency that grants licenses to or otherwise oversees EAS Participants. FCC rules regulate the transmission of EAS alerts. The NWS is a key player in the dissemination of local warnings via the EAS. The great majority of EAS alerts are NWS weather-related alerts.

On November 9, at 2 PM EST, FEMA will transmit the EAS code for national level emergencies to Primary Entry Point (PEP) stations in the national level of the EAS. The PEP stations will then rebroadcast the alert to the general public in their broadcast vicinity, as well as to the next level of EAS Participants monitoring them. This should continue through all levels of the system, until the national alert has been distributed throughout the entire country.

Pursuant to the FCC's rules, all EAS Participants must report back to the FCC on the results of this test, including whether, and from whom, they received the alert message and whether they rebroadcast it. FEMA and the FCC will study these results to determine if there are problems with the system and, if so, how best to remedy them. We anticipate that a nationwide test will be conducted periodically to ensure that the EAS is, and remains, functional.

FEMA and the FCC have already twice tested the EAS national code on a more limited basis, in the state of Alaska. The lessons learned from the Alaska tests will inform how the agencies conduct the nationwide test.

What will people hear and see during the test?

Although the Nationwide EAS Test may resemble the periodic, monthly EAS tests that most Americans are already familiar with, there will be some differences in what viewers will see and hear, which is one reason for conducting a nationwide EAS test. Although the activation will include an audio message indicating that this is a test, a visual message indicating that "this is a test" may not appear on every television channel, especially for cable subscribers. This is due to the use of a "live" national code – the same code that would be used in an actual emergency. FEMA and the FCC are conducting outreach to the public, especially the deaf and hard of hearing, in advance of the test. Outreach will include specific information tailored to the needs of the deaf and hard of hearing and will be readily available at online sites. In addition, FEMA and the FCC will continue to work with EAS Participants to explore possible solutions to address this limitation.

How long will the test last?

We anticipate that the test will last approximately 30 seconds.

Why is the nationwide test being conducted at this particular date and time?

While EAS tests may be disruptive, they are important to ensure that the EAS is functional and that EAS Participants are prepared to issue alerts, and it is our intent to minimize disruption and confusion to the extent possible. The November 9 date is near the end of hurricane season and before the severe winter weather season begins in earnest. The 2 PM EST broadcast time will minimize disruption during rush hours, while ensuring that the test occurs during working hours across the United States.

What is the source of FEMA's and the FCC's authority for conducting the nationwide EAS test?

Pursuant to the FCC's rules, EAS Participants must take part in nationwide tests of the EAS. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS), which administers the EAS, has the authority to ensure the conduct of training, tests, and exercises of the EAS by Executive Order.

Are broadcasters and other EAS Participants ready for the test? What if their equipment does not function properly?

FEMA and the FCC will continue to work with EAS Participants to prepare for the nationwide test and provide technical assistance and best practices with respect to equipment configuration. We expect that all EAS Participants will participate in the nationwide test and that they will have equipment in place to conduct the nationwide EAS test that they already test regularly pursuant to the FCC's rules governing required weekly and monthly EAS tests. We would therefore expect such equipment to be in good working order.

Where does media communications-based alerting fit within the development of next generation alerting systems like PLAN and the availability of social networking sites as tools for emergency alerting?

Because we cannot anticipate what systems might be affected by an emergency, it is important to have a redundant, multi-platform alerting system. The EAS is designed to work when other methods of disseminating emergency alerts are unavailable. While there is no guarantee that any form of communications will withstand major disasters, various elements of the EAS are hardened to withstand such calamities. Moreover, the EAS uses technology that is widely accessible to the public. Almost everyone has access to a radio (for example, in a car or via a battery-powered handheld device) and/or a television receiver.

While our ultimate goal is to have an integrated public alert and warning system that will use multiple communications technologies, the EAS will serve as a primary method for transmitting national emergency alerts and warnings for the foreseeable future.

How can EAS Participants, as well as the public, keep up with developments in connection with nationwide EAS tests?

FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
Public Safety & Homeland Security Bureau

Visit the FCC's Nationwide EAS Test web page, at <http://www.fcc.gov/nationwideeastest>. The FCC will post announcements of all significant developments affecting nationwide testing for both EAS Participants and the general public there.