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Emergency Managers Await New Rules for Critical TIS Service

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By [Michelle Zilis, Managing Editor](#)

Emergency management officials have been waiting for several years for new rules from the FCC on what can be broadcast through AM radio stations dedicated to disseminating information to travelers. Several jurisdictions received citations for broadcasting National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) weather information, but public-safety officials said emergencies are often caused by weather.

When communications networks go down during natural disasters, emergency managers and other officials must find ways to communicate with the public. One popular option dating back to the 1970s is Travelers' Information Stations (TIS).

TIS, also known as Highway Advisory Radio, are AM channels that originally operated only at the ends of the AM frequency band, but now can operate across the entire band (530 – 1700 kHz). The purpose of the stations is for the dissemination of information by broadcast radio to travelers, according to the FCC. The service is only available to governmental entities and park districts. The Public Safety and Homeland Security Bureau (PSHSB) oversees TIS.

The rules governing the stations came under scrutiny five years ago when the FCC issued citations to several cities or states operating TIS stations for broadcasting NOAA weather information as part of their programming, said William Baker, president, American Association of Information Radio Operators (AAIRO).

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"The FCC implied that weather was not an acceptable content item because of the citations of the cities for broadcasting NOAA Weather Radio," Baker said. "They did not state that directly. That was the crux of the problem. The FCC action created confusion because it did not state what it was with regard to NOAA that was not acceptable as a 'travel advisory.' "

The citations left operators with questions about what could and could not be aired on the station. The operators formed a group, AAIRO, to communicate with the FCC in one voice. AAIRO asked the FCC to clarify what content can be aired on TIS stations and suggested the FCC make a clarifying statement that weather could be part of the content, Baker said.

Under Part 90 rules, emergency management officials may use the stations for emergency communications. Emergency situations are often caused by weather so many local broadcasters began broadcasting weather information on their programs. Many users, including highway departments, said weather information is useful at all times. And AAIRO argues that weather should not be restricted to following an emergency, but also in advance of an emergency to mitigate its effects, an AAIRO FCC ex parte filing said.

But rather than issue the clarifying statement, the FCC announced that the TIS rules need a complete review and issued a notice of proposed rulemaking on the subject in February 2009. The FCC asked for comments about how to govern TIS content.

"AAIRO's position is that we want the FCC to clarify that emergency managers have the latitude in an emergency to broadcast what is needed for the safety of the community," Baker said. "The ability to provide quick information to the public is essential during fast-moving events."

Many letters came in voicing support of the stations for public-safety uses and the importance of sharing weather information. Filings mentioned how the stations have been used during hurricanes, tornado watches and warnings, severe rain with floods and winter storms.

During wildfires, the use of TIS stations help quickly move citizens out of harm's way, said Michael Williams, president-executive director, Wildland Residents Association in Santa Barbara (Calif.) County. "The use of low-power radio in emergency situations proves invaluable," he said.

"Our view is regardless of one's economic status, this basic communications tool partnered with today's digital technology helps create a level of confidence and security in local government in times of crisis as well as life's daily chores," said Robert Champagne, Peabody (Mass.) Police Department.

The comment period is still open and 179 filings have been submitted. The rulemaking is awaiting PSHSB action. An FCC spokesperson declined to comment on the status of the rules.

Many comments were filed after Superstorm Sandy and the shootings in Newton, Conn., to voice support for the channels and for emergency managers to have the authority to decide what is important at the time of an event.

During Superstorm Sandy, the township of Lyndhurst, N.J., lost its mass automatic notification function, as well as electricity, cable TV, Internet, cell phones, email, Nixel and smart phones, said Capt. Paul Haggerty, Lyndhurst deputy emergency management coordinator and alert/warning and

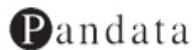
communications coordinator, in a letter filed in support of AAIRO's request. "The only way Lyndhurst and surrounding communities were able to get the proper emergency information and post storm information was on our AM alert radio station on 1700 kHz."

On Dec. 18, AAIRO submitted several letters from public-safety agencies in New Jersey in support of AAIRO's request that the FCC promptly publish new rules, making it clear that TIS stations may, to mitigate the loss of life and property, broadcast critical weather and safety information to the travelling public in advance of, during and following such emergencies, the AAIRO letter said.

For more information on AAIRO, visit the [website](#) or contact Baker at bill@AAIRO.org.

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