

System sends disaster info via wireless

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A bill currently making its way through the U.S. Senate calls for development of a notification system that would use wireless and cellular technology to convey lifesaving information in the event of terrorist attacks and natural disasters.

The bill, called the Warning, Alerts and Response Network (WARN) Act, would establish a national network for transmitting alerts to cell phones, handheld e-mail devices and satellite radio and television, among other media. Any appropriate federal, state or local government agency would have the ability to alert the public of disasters and threats.

WARN provides \$250 million to research, develop and deploy the alert system. Sens. Jim DeMint, R-S.C., and Ben Nelson, D-Neb., are co-sponsors of the bill.

"I'm really excited for this," said DeMint, chairman of the Subcommittee on Disaster Detection and Prevention, in an interview with UPI. "I think something should have been done several years ago, but hopefully within the next few years, we'll have it up.

"I think the technology pretty much exists, we just need to align it with existing government warning systems," DeMint added.

The government relies primarily on the Emergency Alert System, formerly the Emergency Broadcast System, to send information to the public via television and radio in the event of emergencies. One advantage of the new proposed network is that unlike the current

warning system, it allows the possibility of geographically targeting groups with disaster information.

DeMint said providing targeted information could be useful in the event of a terrorist attack, where wind directions of biological or chemical agents may require different information to be sent to different people. Richard Taylor, executive director of North Carolina's Wireless 911 Board, which works to provide enhanced 911 service for cellular and wireless devices, said geographic information could have been given specifically to Houston residents living directly in the path or flood plain of Hurricane Rita.

"When you can sit there and notify each of those folks individually ... that's power, that's saving lives and possibly property," Taylor said.

Wesley Denton, communications director for DeMint, said because one of WARN's cosponsors is Sen. Ted Stevens, R-Alaska, chairman of the Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee, he is optimistic that the bill will progress quickly through the legislative process. Taylor said because technology advances quicker than legislation, local governments and companies could start to take the lead on a wireless notification system if federal action comes slowly.

Taylor, who has spoken to Congress about the integration of cellular service with emergency response systems, said a system like WARN is past due.

"We're in an information age, yet from a public notification perspective, we're still ... in the Stone Age," Taylor said.

Taylor said the problem with the Emergency Alert System is that people might not always be accessing radio or television broadcasts, but many Americans have continuous access to cell phones.

"They're not always in tune to broadcast outlets. ... It's just not reaching the folks that we need to reach like it did 20 or 30 years ago," Taylor said.

DeMint said he and his subcommittee have had meetings and hearings with cellular providers to discuss the feasibility of the warning system.

"I think we're going to create a system for these companies to compete for the best pre- and post-disaster warning and follow-up systems," DeMint said.

He explained that the government would be responsible for making sure disaster information is in a signal format that can be read by each of the different carriers. He said cell-phone providers would be required to disclose to customers if they are compatible with the all-hazard system, creating an incentive for carriers to work with the government.

"I think they'll make this a competitive thing that will get the system better and better by the week," DeMint said.

In July Christopher Guttman-McCabe, assistant vice president of homeland security and regulatory policy at the Cellular Telecommunications & Internet Association, which represents all levels of the wireless industry, said at this point "there is nothing deployed in the network for delivering messages to a specific targeted geographic area," though the industry is investigating the feasibility of doing so.

He said CTIA and the industry are working with existing capabilities to establish and initiate a voluntary effort to deliver presidential-level alerts via text message.

"(T)his initial service must be approached with caution, as limitations and concerns regarding both capacity and message content are likely to

arise during an emergency," Guttman-McCabe testified.

Mark Siegel, a spokesperson for Cingular Wireless, said it would not yet be appropriate to comment on emergency-notification efforts. Taylor said he believes cell-phone carriers would be willing to do "whatever they can" to make an alert network a reality.

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