

## FCC Multilingual Emergency Alert Meetings May Draw Agreement

The coming months may see an accord between broadcasters and public interest advocates on how to translate emergency warnings into Spanish and other languages, said participants in meetings at the FCC on the alerts.

Tuesday, the commission released a summary of the June 14 first round of negotiations brokered by the Public Safety Bureau. The minutes show some common ground between industry and public interest groups (CD Aug 15 p11).

Parties on either side acknowledge a shared sense of urgency about clarifying the protocol under which broadcasters warn listeners in languages other than English when foreign-language stations are knocked off the air. Some participants believe a deal is possible within months on the regime broadcasters should follow; others said it's too soon to handicap the outcome.

All parties hope for an agreement before an FCC order on multilingual warnings arrives. That likely will come within six months of publication in the *Federal Register* of a July FCC notice authorizing governors to trigger such alerts (CD July 13 p5).

The June meeting included representatives of NAB, the Independent Spanish Broadcasters Association, the Minority Media and Telecommunications Council and United Church of Christ.

At the next meeting, for which no date has been set, participants hope to discuss each other's proposals in light of general goals set in June, said MMTTC Executive Director David Honig. His group petitioned the FCC in 2005 to adopt a "designated hitter" plan, with stations in markets dense with Spanish speakers agreeing to couch alerts in that language. "We're in agreement on a lot of things," said Honig.

Cheryl Leanza, United Church of Christ managing director, agreed. "We need to work on more about the practicalities and the way that can happen that works for everyone," she said. "I am fairly confident that we will be able to find a way that does work." Broadcaster reluctance on the designated hitter plan doesn't mean there isn't common ground, she added. "If the FCC or the broadcasters don't think that particular solution will work, that's not a barrier to finding a solution."

A broadcast official said the industry shares many goals with their counterparts. "You want to make sure that everyone is getting emergency information in a timely manner," said the official. Broadcasters want to do that in an efficient and voluntary way, said the official.

Radio stations are best suited to alert those who don't speak English, because during power failures battery operated receivers are the best way to get information, said Florida Association of Broadcasters President Pat Roberts.

He told the June FCC meeting how his state sends Spanish alerts, a method NAB wants emulated nationally.

Florida's Emergency Operations Center uses translators to issue Spanish alerts to stations assigned to broadcast them without having to worry about the cost or logistics of making translations. But many states are unable to alert all broadcasters to emergencies, relying instead on municipal notifications, said Roberts. A nationwide update of state gear would cost \$30 million to \$40 million, he said. "I don't think broadcasters should ever originate the message, we're simply the carrier of the message," he added.

Public interest groups agree with Roberts, but disagree on whether the industry should set voluntary alert regimes, as broadcasters want, or the FCC should make rules. Despite commission encouragement to act on their own, states didn't follow Florida's model, said Honig. "The best evidence that this doesn't work is that it hasn't worked, even after a horrible disaster like Katrina," he said. "No one stepped up. It just wasn't a priority."

It didn't help that the FCC waited two years before formally addressing MMTC's petition, said advocates. "It's almost laughable that we have to be having this discussion now," said Leanza. But she and others said FCC Chairman Kevin Martin has made it a priority. Martin has emphasized emergency communications during his tenure, said Roberts. "If he's going to have a legacy, he's the guy that brought emergency communications to the forefront," he said. "If we had the same leadership at FEMA and Homeland [Security Department], I think you would see something move." -- *Jonathan Make*