

National alert system a bust on first try The first nationwide test of the Emergency Alert System experienced more than just a few "technical difficulties"

By Rick Nathanson, *Albuquerque Journal*

If you thought the president of the United States would be able to instantly communicate with most Americans in case of an emergency, think again.

The first nationwide test of the Emergency Alert System experienced more than just a few "technical difficulties" - and many New Mexicans were among those left out.

The test, which was supposed to issue a 30-second alert simultaneously on all radio and television stations on Wednesday at noon Mountain time, was not delivered via any local TV or radio stations in New Mexico. Other parts of the country reported problems, as well.

"This is exactly why they did this test - to find out if the system worked - and it didn't," said Dan Slentz, chief of engineering at KOB-TV, Channel 4. "Even if the system didn't operate as intended, the test worked, because it told us what we needed to know, which is the system needs some work."

Some channels delivered to New Mexico homes via cable or satellite services did carry the emergency alert, though it's not clear how many or which channels. Speaking from Comcast's regional office in Denver, Cindy Parsons, vice president of communications, said she believes most homes within the New Mexico Comcast service area "saw the alert as intended."

The digital message was to include "data burst" tones and encoded digital information to generate an audio message as well as a "crawl" for TV stations indicating "this is a test of the Emergency Alert System," said Sean Anker, director of engineering at KRQETV and KASA-TV.

The test was conducted by the Federal Emergency Management Agency in partnership with the Federal Communications Commission and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Instead, some viewers saw uninterrupted programming, some saw a warning picture but no sound and there were reports that some viewers

received a warning picture with a tape of Lady Gaga singing in the background.

FEMA on Wednesday posted a notice on its website saying, "We are currently collecting data about the initial results, and it will take the test's participants several weeks to send us the full results."

At least one station in the region, Denver's KMGH-TV, the ABC affiliate, had its audio knocked out for two hours following the test, according to station general manager Byron Grandy. "We received the test message but couldn't pass it along because the (digital) coding was bad. That, in turn, we think, caused hardware problems, which shut down the audio."

Bill Harris, director of engineering for Cumulus Media in New Mexico and a member of the state Emergency Alert System committee, explained that company-owned KKOB-AM was one of 67 "primary entry points" around the country. The emergency alert, generated in Washington, D.C., was supposed to get transmitted to those points, which in turn would be relayed within seconds to all the other TV and radio stations.

Because the alert never arrived at KKOB-AM, "we were never able to transmit it," Harris said.

Nick Piatek, spokesman for the New Mexico Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Management, said the failure likely occurred "at the origin of the message, not at the local levels."

On the upside, the state Department of Homeland Security successfully completed a drill in which ham radio operators throughout the state helped disseminate an emergency alert, Piatek said.

In addition, Los Alamos National Laboratory conducted a successful in-house test in which 6,000 approved cell phones received an emergency alert text message, said lab spokeswoman Nancy Ambrosiano.

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