Preparing for a National EAS Test

Intro

To assess how a national EAS event would function if activated, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) at pre-described times, may disseminate national tests via the EAS broadcast-based Primary Entry Point (PEP) system. Testing the broadcast EAS relay is highly appropriate, as an actual national emergency could well occur when the internet and other forms of communication technologies are unavailable or otherwise compromised.

All broadcast and cable operations must participate in national EAS tests with National Periodic Test (NPT) being the most common. Again, participation is mandatory, there is no "opting out" of either the NPT or Emergency Action Notification (EAN) transmissions. In addition to operational participation in these tests, the FCC also requires broadcasters and cable operators to file several related forms online.

The Paperwork

Presently there are three separate online "forms" which must be filed with the FCC using their EAS Test Reporting System (ETRS)[1]. Form one covers EAS equipment status. Form two, which tracks how well the system performed on test day, must be filed within 24 hours after the national test is issued. Finally, Form three is typically due within 45 days of the test date. Participants are strongly encouraged to verify the actual dates to ensure all forms are properly submitted within their respective due dates to avoid any filing issues, errors, or potential fines.

Prepping for the Test

Before, or after filling out form one and well in advance of the actual test date, it is essential to ensure the station's EAS equipment can receive and process the National Periodic Test event code and otherwise is complying with FCC regulations. Typically, because of the scope of the test, the NPT will use the national FIPS location code shown as six zeroes (000000).

As one prepares for the test date, it is best practice to update the EAS equipment software/firmware to the most recent version. Maintaining compliance and operational readiness is not only important it is critical to successful operation and avoidance of any non-compliant fines.

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[1] More information on the ETRS can be found on the FCC's website: https://www.fcc.gov/general/eas-test-reporting-system

Previous summary reports from the FCC indicate many problems can easily be addressed BEFORE the test. Following these simple steps could prevent any potential issues well before the actual test date.

- While it might seem obvious, check to ensure the EAS equipment is powered on and operating. As an EAS manufacturer, there are few things more dismaying than a panicked call the day before a national EAS test (or even the day of the test) asking for assistance or a replacement for a non-operational EAS device.

- For broadcast-based tests – and as a matter of general system readiness, you should ensure the EAS monitoring radios are tuned to the proper sources outlined in the state or local EAS plan.

- Ensure the equipment has the latest or at the least, the minimally acceptable software installed. For Digital Alert Systems/ EAS devices (DASDEC™ and One-Net™ anything V3.0 or above is compliant with current EAN and NPT rules. Devices operating with version 2.x or earlier must be upgraded to properly comply with current FCC rules in handling NPT. If you have any questions, please contact the factory for guidance.

- The equipment configuration is a major factor to assure proper operation, not only for the NPT but in general. In support of this, Digital Alert Systems provides numerous resources on its website regarding DASDEC/One-Net configuration. Customers can take solace that if the device is running V3.0 or V4.0 software, there is little to do aside from tuning to the right EAS monitoring sources and configuring the outputs to the downstream audio/text/video systems. With V3.0/ V4.0 software the device will automatically forward an NPT upon receipt as specified in the current FCC's rules.

- One configuration issue worth mentioning separately is system clock errors. If you are using a Network Time Protocol (NTP) server connection on a DASDEC or One-Net device and are syncing over the internet, there should be no issues. However, it's not a bad idea to double-check during your configuration review to ensure the device is synced to the right time — this includes the proper time zone.

Some issues outside of your control (and ours):

- Poor audio quality. There's little we can do if the audio is degraded upstream of your site during the EAS transmission, as has happened in the past. If this happens, report it on Form Three. Additionally, the DASDEC/One-Net can take an audio "snapshot" for further analysis should you care to keep this information as part of the log file.

- Power outage. This is not a likely scenario if you have proper power backup for your facility. Check those power backups are charged and in good working order.

- The FCC's 2018 NPT summary report mentioned several other odd and sundry issues that might or might not fall under your direct control. One was a report of owls (possibly a protected species) nesting in the station's monitoring antennas which interfered with the station's EAS reception for a previous test. Again, see the second point above and check your monitoring inputs are working!

Conclusion

The national EAS test is a fairly routine occurrence at this point and should be an unremarkable EAS event requiring minimal care and preparation. One should simply double-check the EAS equipment is installed, operating, tuned to the proper EAS monitoring sources, along with maintaining the latest software helps to remove any worries regarding the test. To help outline EAS procedures, it's also a good idea to verify you have a copy of the EAS Operating Handbook at the ready, which. Finally, it is an excellent idea to review any EAS procedures with staff, including what things to touch – and not to touch – during a national EAS test.