

Remarks of FCC Chairman Kevin J. Martin
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Association of Public Television Stations
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As Prepared for Delivery

Thank you for that kind introduction. I am honored to receive this award – it means a lot to me to be recognized for the hard work of the Commission during one of the worst natural disasters in our nation’s history. As we all know, Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast. People lost their homes, their businesses, and – most tragic of all – their loved ones. Our hearts go out to all the survivors who continue the process of putting their lives back together.

The degree of destruction to broadcast facilities in the region was unprecedented. We estimate that over 100 broadcast stations were knocked off the air after Katrina alone, leaving hundreds of thousands of area residents without critical news and emergency information.

As we just saw, public television stations were among the resourceful and courageous who defied the odds to maintain operations during the storm and to restore broadcast service quickly thereafter. Just two days after the hurricane struck, stations were back on the air informing storm victims where to find shelter, food, and water; what numbers to call for emergency medical attention; and how to contact missing family and friends. Broadcasters also provided information to rescue workers that proved critical to successful rooftop rescues.

Louisiana Public Television and other noncommercial licensees shared their facilities with local commercial broadcasters whose transmitters or antennas were gone. For instance, Louisiana Public Broadcasting Network made its Baton Rouge facility available to WWL, the CBS affiliate in New Orleans. This enabled WWL to remain on the air continuously throughout Katrina and its aftermath. As a result, people in the stricken Gulf Coast region received newscasts and storm coverage from broadcasters who otherwise would have been silenced.

In addition, one APTS member, Houston Station KUHT, is a shining example of the valuable role broadcasters play in public emergencies. KUHT provided critical information to the storm’s evacuees and even took in the New Orleans public station’s staff when they had no station to return to. KUHT continues to play an important role in the region’s recovery, and I would like to express my gratitude for their efforts.

Within hours after the storm, APTS requested a waiver from the FCC to permit every one of its member stations to air fundraisers for hurricane relief. We were pleased to grant it quickly – because we know that public stations know how to do quality on-air fundraising drives for worthy causes.

For our part, the Commission took quick and decisive action to assist in the preservation and restoration of broadcast service to areas in Katrina's path. Even before the hurricane struck, the FCC's Media Bureau established special procedures to expedite emergency authorizations and assistance, and issued public notices to inform broadcasters in the area how to seek the Commission's help.

We granted stations more than 70 special temporary authorizations and granted more than 100 temporary frequency authorizations to permit emergency workers, relief organizations, and companies to provide communications and broadcast service in the affected areas and to shelters around the country. In most cases, these requests were granted within four hours of receipt, and all requests were processed within 24 hours.

The Commission was open seven days a week for extended hours following the hurricanes to assist consumers, broadcasters and other federal agencies with emergency services. I am extremely proud of the efforts and dedication of the FCC staff that helped us during that time.

Now the Commission's responsibility is to examine lessons learned during Katrina, Rita, and Wilma so that we can improve our response in the event of future emergencies. An independent panel we created to review the impact of Hurricane Katrina on communications networks recently held its first meeting and will submit a final report to the Commission by June.

There is much left to be done, but I commend public television on its extraordinary service during this time of great need. Public television's role in this disaster was one of critical importance, and you have proved that you will be there when your viewers and neighbors need you the most. We know that we can count on public broadcasters to work together with the FCC whenever emergencies arise.

Thank you.