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PREPARED REMARKS AT
EARTHQUAKE COMMUNICATIONS PREPAREDNESS FORUM
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Good morning. It's a pleasure to be with you all.

The recent devastating earthquake and tsunami in Japan are reminders of how heavily we depend on reliable and resilient communications networks, especially during major emergencies.

The catastrophic Haitian earthquake in January 2010 was a similar reminder of the need for redundant and reliable communications networks.

And although not an earthquake, the recent disastrous tornadoes in Alabama and elsewhere in the South underscore the importance of reliable communications networks and the value of early warning systems.

Since last week, the FCC has been actively monitoring the situation in the South, including staying in touch with service providers to maintain situational awareness and offer assistance where needed.

Thus far, carriers and broadcasters have been handling the damage to the communications infrastructure admirably, and we have not received express requests for assistance or special temporary authority. For example, most outages to cellular networks have been isolated and have not resulted in more widespread outages.

It is an unfortunate irony that disasters like earthquakes, tornadoes, and hurricanes often provide the best opportunity to learn about the strengths and weaknesses of communications infrastructure.

The Commission organized this forum in large measure so that we could learn from the experiences with earthquakes in Japan and Haiti.

The Japanese used broadband to mitigate the impact of the earthquake and tsunami, and their efforts offer examples for us.

For example, the Japan Meteorological Agency's earthquake early warning system relied on broadband to automatically issue alerts via cell phones and TV after the first, less harmful earthquake shock wave, providing a short window for people to prepare for the more powerful shock wave that followed.

The broadband-based warning system also caused many energy plants, industrial facilities, and transportation services to shut down automatically, averting problems at these locations.

High-speed trains automatically came to safe stops in response to earthquake alerts transmitted along the rail system.

The United States doesn't currently have a comparable earthquake warning system. It is something we should consider, especially for our regions that are most prone to earthquakes.

The events in Japan also demonstrate the importance of reliable and resilient Internet-based communications, especially mobile services.

Residents of Japan with mobile phones, for example, were able to rely on their battery-powered devices to access web-based disaster message boards, Twitter, and social networking sites to report on their status and check for updates regarding family and friends.

The continued ability to use wireless devices to access the Internet was in large part due to the redundancy of Japan's wireless mesh network, which can automatically reroute signals over alternate paths if one route is destroyed. The reliability of mesh networking is another lesson we can draw from Japan.

Likewise, in Haiti, communications after the earthquake depended on surviving cellular networks, most of which had backup power.

The Haitian experience, like the Katrina experience in the United States, underscored the close relationship between the power and communications industries and the need for alternative backup power to support communications facilities.

The Japanese tragedy showed the role that broadcasting plays in emergencies. Radio in particular played a significant role in Japan, as residents who lost power could turn on the radio in their cars and receive essential information.

The Japanese tragedy also showed the importance of having redundant transmission facilities.

Three of seven trans-Pacific undersea cables had sections of their systems badly damaged in the earthquake. These undersea cable systems are expected to be restored soon, but because of both the redundancy and the resiliency of the undersea cable networks, international communications to Japan continued even in the days immediately following the earthquake.

Such redundancy is generally in place for undersea cable systems that serve the United States. The Commission keeps a close eye on the resiliency of these important communications networks, and Japan shows us why it is important that we be vigilant.

The FCC in recent years has made important strides in strengthening the reliability and resiliency of our communications systems -- in large measure because of the experiences of major disasters such as the attacks of September 11, 2001, and the massive destruction and loss of life caused by Hurricane Katrina in August of 2005.

Just last month we launched a Notice of Inquiry on the Reliability and Continuity of Communications Networks to examine the most effective ways to ensure that our critical communications infrastructure is prepared when disaster strikes.

The rapid migration of our Nation's communications infrastructure from older legacy technologies to newer Internet Protocol-based broadband technologies requires us to further ensure that these modern networks can respond to major outages caused by natural disasters.

We need a better understanding of how to minimize outages across all communications platforms and how we can strengthen the reliability of emergency communications, while balancing the limited resources of communications carries.

Today's forum addresses some of these key issues.

We have a very strong slate of participants in this forum, and I want to take this opportunity to thank all of our speakers and panelists for taking time out of their busy schedules to be here today.

In particular, I would like to recognize Administrator Craig Fugate from FEMA for his strong leadership of the nation's emergency response agency and for his willingness to contribute to this event.

I would also like to recognize the President's Special Assistant for Homeland Security, Richard Reed. We very much appreciate his participation, particularly in light of his key role in advising the President following major disasters such as the earthquakes in Haiti and Japan and the recent devastating tornadoes in Alabama and other parts of the South.

And I would like to recognize Counselor Fujino from the Embassy of Japan and extend our sincere concern and sympathy to the Japanese people during this difficult time.

As with Hurricane Katrina in the United States, the Great East Japan Earthquake offers the opportunity to enhance our understanding of disasters and the crucial role served by emergency communications to improve disaster preparedness and readiness.

And so I challenge each of you to use this forum this morning to help us determine how we can best prepare our country.