

COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON  
TACTICAL AIR AND LAND FORCES  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON READINESS  
COMMITTEE ON THE BUDGET

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Received & Inspected

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FCC Mailroom

January 16, 2018

Chairman Ajit Pai  
Federal Communications Commission  
445 12th Street S.W.,  
Washington, D.C. 20554

Administrator William B. "Brock" Long  
Federal Emergency Management Agency  
500 C St S.W.,  
Washington, D.C. 20024

Subject: Federal Wireless Emergency Alert System

Dear Chairman Pai and Administrator Long:

I am writing today to inform you of serious inefficiencies and problems with the Federal Wireless Emergency Alert (WEA) System, which were prominent during the recent devastating Thomas Fire and impacted many of my constituents on the Central Coast of California. I ask that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) work with the appropriate stakeholders to address these communication issues that have the potential to prevent the loss of life during emergencies. It would be beneficial for my constituents and Americans across the nation for the FCC to reconsider its delay of the 2016 rule that would strengthen WEA by improving geographic targeting capabilities, increasing the maximum character length, and including the availability of multilingual and multimedia WEA messages.

The WEA is a public alert and warning system that uses existing communications assets of the Emergency Alert System participants for federal, state and local authorities to disseminate important emergency information, like extreme weather alerts, to the American public. Additionally, Executive Order 13407 issued by President George W. Bush in 2006 established that "it is the policy of the United States to have an effective, reliable, integrated, flexible and comprehensive system to alert and warn the American people in situations of war, terrorists attack, natural disaster, or other hazards to public safety and well-being..." However, the current WEA system has serious restrictions that limit its ability to reach the intended audiences properly.

WEA's inability to target messages to specific geographic areas means that certain counties cannot effectively use WEA without creating a widespread panic and unnecessary mass evacuations; thus, producing another public hazard. For instance, a WEA message meant to only alert certain Santa Barbara residents was sent out on Sunday, December 10, 2017 at 2:19 a.m. to the entire County and prompted a misunderstanding as to where the impacted areas that needed to evacuate due to the Thomas fire were actually located. Additionally, WEA has a current limit of no more than 90 characters, which forces agencies to abbreviate alerts and results in an unclear and often confusing message.

Furthermore, including multimedia and multilingual WEA messages during disasters is another tool that would allow alerting agencies to send targeted evacuation maps or videos in multiple languages directly to mobile users. This has the potential to provide additional clarity to the public and ensure the well-being of everyone. Instead, through the current process, agencies must rely on social media to share these resources.

As we continue to experience prolonged and disastrous wildfire seasons in the Western United States, it is imperative that we are sufficiently prepared and we address outstanding issues with the WEA system. Again, I ask that the FCC reconsider its delay of the 2016 proposed changes to WEA and for the FCC and FEMA to work with appropriate stakeholders to ensure we are adequately equipped to communicate emergency alerts to the public during the next natural disaster.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "S.O. Carbal", written over the word "Sincerely,".

SALUD O. CARBAJAL  
Member of Congress