



Wireless Emergency Alerts (WEA)

Background

Have you ever thought that, for emergency alerts to be distributed as quickly as possible, they should be sent to cell phones? The Federal Communications Commission (FCC), along with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the wireless industry, is working to make that possible.

What Are Wireless Emergency Alerts (WEA)?

WEA (formerly known as the Commercial Mobile Alert System (CMAS) or Personal Localized Alerting Network (PLAN)) is a public safety system that allows customers who own certain wireless phone models and other enabled mobile devices to receive geographically-targeted, text-like messages alerting them of imminent threats to safety in their area. The technology ensures that emergency alerts will not get stuck in highly congested areas, which can happen with standard mobile voice and texting services. WEA was established pursuant to the Warning, Alert and Response Network (WARN) Act.

WEA enables government officials to target emergency alerts to specific geographic areas (e.g. lower Manhattan) through cell towers. The cell towers broadcast the emergency alerts for reception by WEA-enabled mobile devices.

WEA complements the existing Emergency Alert System (EAS) which is implemented by the FCC and FEMA at the federal level through broadcasters and other media service providers. WEA and the EAS are part of FEMA's Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS).

Wireless companies volunteer to participate in WEA, which is the result of a unique public/private partnership between the FCC, FEMA and the wireless industry to enhance public safety.

Participating wireless carriers were required to deploy WEA by April 7, 2012.

How does WEA work?

Pre-authorized national, state or local government may send emergency alerts regarding public safety emergencies, such as evacuation orders or shelter in place orders due to severe weather, a terrorist threat or chemical spill, to WEA.

Alerts from authenticated public safety officials are sent through FEMA's IPAWS to participating wireless carriers.

Participating wireless carriers push the alerts from cell towers to mobile devices in the affected area. The alerts appear like text messages on mobile devices.

Who will receive the alerts?

Alerts are broadcast only from cell towers in the zone of an emergency. The alerts are geographically targeted to cell towers in the location of the emergency. Phones that are using the cell towers in the alert zone will receive the WEA. This means that if an alert is sent to an area in New York, all WEA-capable phones in the alert area can receive the WEA, even if they are phones that are roaming or



visiting from another state. In other words, a customer visiting from Chicago would receive alerts in New York if they have a WEA-enabled mobile device and their phone is using a cell tower in the alert zone.

How much will consumers pay to receive WEA?

Alerts are free. Customers do not pay to receive WEA.

Do consumers have to sign up to receive alerts?

Consumers do not need to sign up for this service. WEA allows government officials to send emergency alerts to all subscribers with WEA-capable devices if their wireless carrier participates in the program.

What alerts will WEA deliver?

Alerts from WEA cover only critical emergency situations. Consumers will receive only three types of alerts:

1. Alerts issued by the President;
2. Alerts involving imminent threats to safety or life;
3. Amber Alerts.

Participating carriers may allow subscribers to block all but Presidential alerts.

What will consumers experience when they receive a WEA?

A WEA alert will be accompanied by a unique attention signal and vibration, which is particularly helpful to people with hearing or vision-related disabilities.

Will consumers be able to receive WEAs on a prepaid phone?

Yes. Consumers with prepaid phones can receive WEAs as long as their provider has decided to participate in WEA and the customer has a WEA-enabled device. These consumers will receive WEA just as customers with postpaid, monthly service will.

Will WEA track my location?

No. WEA is not designed to – and does not – track the location of anyone receiving a WEA alert.

Are WEAs text messages?

No. Many providers have chosen to transmit WEAs using a technology that is separate and different from voice calls and SMS text messages. This technology ensures that emergency alerts will not get stuck in highly congested areas, which can happen with standard mobile voice and texting services.

Will consumers need a new phone or a smart phone to receive alerts?

Some phones may require only software upgrades to receive alerts, while in other cases a subscriber may need to purchase a new WEA-capable device. Consumers should check with their wireless carrier regarding the availability of WEA-capable handsets.



Is WEA available everywhere?

Participation in WEA by wireless carriers is widespread but voluntary. Some carriers offer WEA over all or parts of their service areas or over all or only some of their wireless devices. Other carriers may not offer WEA at all. Even if you have WEA-enabled device, you will not receive WEAs in a service area where the provider is not offering WEA or if your device is roaming on a provider that does not support the WEA service. Consumers should check with their wireless carriers to determine the extent to which they are offering WEA.

Can consumers block WEAs?

Partially. Participating wireless carriers may offer subscribers with WEA-capable handsets the ability to block alerts involving imminent threats to safety of life and/or AMBER Alerts; however, consumers cannot block emergency alerts issued by the President.

Why can't consumers block WEAs issued by the President?

In passing the WARN Act, Congress allowed participating carriers to offer subscribers the capability to block all WEAs except those issued by the President.

How will subscribers know if their carrier offers WEA?

The FCC requires all wireless carriers that do not participate in WEA to notify customers. Consumers should check with their wireless carriers to determine the extent to which they are offering WEA.

My friends and I have the same wireless carrier. They just received a WEA over their cell phones, but I have not. Why?

Some participating carriers are offering WEA on some, but not all, of their mobile devices. Consumers should check with their wireless carriers to find out if their cell phone is WEA-capable. Information about WEA-capable handsets can also be found at www.ctia.org/consumer_info/safety/index.cfm/AID/12082.

Sometimes, even though you and a friend are in the same location, your mobile devices may be using different towers. If you are on the edge of an alert zone, your phone may be using a tower that is outside of the alert zone and therefore not broadcasting the alert. As you move around, your phone changes from tower to tower to offer the best service. When your phone starts using a tower that is in an alert zone, you will receive the WEA.

Why are some consumers receiving WEA test alerts on their mobile phones?

Participating wireless carriers are required under FCC rules to conduct periodic testing of their WEA infrastructure. As part of their test, some participating carriers may choose (but are not required) to send test alerts to WEA-enabled handsets. Consumers with questions about these test messages should contact their wireless carriers.

How geographically precise is WEA?

Participating wireless providers are generally required to send the alerts to a geographic area no larger than the county or counties affected by the emergency situation. In some cases, however, participating carriers may be able to target alerts to smaller areas.



For More Information

For more information, visit FCC's Consumer website at www.fcc.gov/consumers, or contact the FCC's Consumer Center by calling 1-888-CALL-FCC (1-888-225-5322) voice or 1-888-TELL-FCC (1-888-835-5322) TTY; faxing 1-866-418-0232; or writing to:

Federal Communications Commission
Consumer and Governmental Affairs Bureau
Consumer Inquiries and Complaints Division
445 12th Street, S.W.
Washington, DC 20554

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