

The Communications Blame Game

By Larry Van Horn, N5FPW, *Monitoring Times* Assistant Editor

As I watched the nearly continuous coverage by the national news networks of the hurricane Katrina disaster on the Mississippi Gulf coast and southeast parishes of Louisiana, the winds had barely quit howling before politicians were on TV waving their fingers and placing blame for failed communications and slow government response.

But, as is the norm in Washington D.C., the blame is not being channeled in the right direction, and, as is usually the case, the politicians are missing the mark entirely.

In the March 2004 issue of *Monitoring Times*, I wrote an editorial on *Interoperability: Being Responsible*. I won't quote that entire article here, but let me hit some of the highlights to help put this all in perspective:

"It always seems to take a major disaster to highlight radio incompatibility issues that plague this nation's public safety community. This was dramatically highlighted on September 11, 2001, during the terrorist attacks in New York, Washington, and Western Pennsylvania. The battle cry of the public safety officials involved in these disasters was they could not communicate with any other agencies due to a lack of radio compatibility.

"However, despite this heavy interest and the promise of agencies being able to communicate with each other using the P25 protocol, we still see new digital systems in portions of this country switching to non-P25 compliant communications systems. Are the taxpayers of these jurisdictions being well served and their taxes well spent? In a word, no!

"So which public safety agencies in the United States aren't on the P25 bandwagon? Who cannot talk to the Feds and other vital agencies on their radio systems in times of disaster or when their citizens are under attack?"

Here is an updated list of my non-P25 Dishonor Roll from the central Gulf coast:

Owner - Non P25 System Type

Acadia Parish Public Safety, LA - LTR

Ascension Parish Fire Departments, LA - LTR

Avoyelles Parish Public Safety, LA - EDACS

Harrison County/Biloxi/Gulfport Public Safety, MS - ProVoice Regular

Iberia Parish, LA - LTR

Iberville Parish Fire/Rescue, LA - EDACS (Parish law enforcement uses Motorola)

Jefferson Davis Parish, LA - 800 & UHF LTR

New Orleans Public Safety, LA - ProVoice Regular

Pointe Coupee Parish Public Safety, LA - ProVoice Regular

St Martin Parish Public Safety, LA - ProVoice Regular

St Tammany Parish Public Safety, LA - ProVoice Regular

Terrebonne Parish Consolidated Government, LA - LTR

The disabled City of New Orleans network couldn't interface with the state of Louisiana trunk system, which was almost fully operational within hours of the center making

landfall. Instead, the New Orleans first responders had to use two 800 MHz nationwide simplex mutual aid channels in order to communicate after the storm. Their \$26 million non-P25 compliant system was knocked out and could not be supplemented by the state trunk system.

And why could the state not help? Because the city uses an 800 MHz ProVoice EDACS public safety trunk system that is not compatible with the state's wide area 800 MHz Motorola trunk system.

To illustrate how serious this issue is in the New Orleans area, the city's trunk system is not even compatible with any other trunk system in Orleans or neighboring Jefferson Parish. The Orleans Parish Sheriff, New Orleans Port Authority (responsible for law enforcement on the Crescent City Connection bridge across the Mississippi River), and the Regional Transit Authority buses and police all use an 800 MHz Motorola analog system!

In Jefferson Parish, the various city and parish law enforcement agencies system use an 800 MHz Motorola mixed mode (P25 compliant) trunk system. The Kenner Public Safety trunk system, where the New Orleans International Airport is located, and Plaquemines Parish to the south use an 800 MHz Motorola analog trunk system.

Are you beginning to get the picture?

Spectrum is Not the Issue

Former Sept. 11 commission Chairman Tom Kean says the lack of radio spectrum for interoperable communications between first responders in Louisiana "cost lives," as it did at the World Trade Center.

"On the ground, the people that get there first can't talk to each other because the radio communications don't work," Kean told a CNN reporter. "They haven't got enough of what's called spectrum."

Uh, excuse me, Mr. Kean. Before you make any more statements about the situation on the ground, you might want to do a little homework. I see plenty of 800 MHz spectrum left in the New Orleans metro area. What you have failed to identify is the real reason New Orleans and St. Tammany Parish could not talk to their neighbors: incompatible trunk systems and loss of electrical power to the existing systems.

Kean said a bill in Congress to provide more spectrum was stalled. "Nothing has been happening, and again, people on the ground – police, fire, medical personnel – couldn't talk to each other. That's outrageous and it's a scandal and I think it cost lives," he concluded.

Yes, Mr. Kean, the lack of communications probably did cost lives and it is a scandal, but not for the reasons you gave in your statement to the press. The idea that death and human suffering can be attributed to "lack of

spectrum" is ridiculous. Don't confuse New Orleans with the situation in New York City: If City of New Orleans officials had had all the spectrum in the world, nothing could have compensated for the fact they are using a trunk system that is not compatible with their neighbors' and the failure of the electrical power grid.

The 700 MHz Bill of Goods

Unfortunately, the so-called experts and lawmakers have been sold a lousy bill of goods on communications issues by the radio equipment manufacturers and their lobbyists in Washington D.C. They have pushed for the new "magic band" that will rescue us from all the problems of a terrorist attack or natural disaster – the proposed 700 MHz interoperable public safety band. So, it is time to set the record straight and let me make this as clear as I can, so even a Senator or Congressman can understand it.

"It's the interoperability of the various systems, stupid, not the spectrum space!" And that's what the P25 protocol was designed to correct and what New Orleans chose to ignore.

Congress's answer? More legislation and spending more taxpayer money. Here is a sample of some of the insanity from inside the beltway after the storm hit the Gulf Coast:

"We have not kept the promise we made 10 years ago," said Rep. Jane Harman, D-Calif., calling the situation "a black eye" and "an embarrassment" for lawmakers. She and Rep. Curt Weldon, R-Penn., have written to Speaker of the House Rep. Denny Hastert, R-Ill., to ask for a suspension of the normal rules of debate so that a bill to enforce a deadline for handing the relevant frequencies (TV channels 60-69; 700 MHz PS band) to first responders can be passed...

In the Senate, a similar measure, sponsored by John McCain, R-Ariz. and Joe Lieberman, D-Conn., is currently before the Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee. Spokesman Amy Call said Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, R-Tenn, was working with Commerce Committee Chairman Sen. Ted Stevens, R-Alaska, to try and get that bill to the floor soon, too. "The Leader saw first-hand on the ground the challenges, and is working with several members about further fixes in this area."

In a nationally published article, Shaun Waterman, UPI Homeland and National Security editor, offers his readers this remarkable statement: "The parts of the spectrum identified by the 1995 Public Safety Wireless Advisory Committee report are in the high 700-MHz range – which experts say is ideal for use by emergency services because signals sent over these frequencies can penetrate walls and travel long distances."

Mr. Waterman, I have some land in southeast Louisiana I would like to sell you! 700 MHz signals do not travel long distances. Look around at the number of 800 MHz cell phone towers you need to get good coverage in your area. Pretty much the same problem exists at 700 MHz. The infrastructure to put 700 MHz repeater systems to cover every part of this country will cost the taxpayers billions of dollars. Add to that the fact that every user would need a new radio to cover 700 MHz, and it becomes obvious this is going to be a very impractical solution which most of the U.S. will probably never buy into nor implement.

Don't Fund Non-compliant Systems

So, while the American people sit through another round of heated Congressional hearings, with everyone blaming everyone else, how about we get a word into this debate about getting rid of the *real* problem – these non-P25 compliant systems? It is time for the citizens of the local public safety agencies to demand that we get rid of systems which hinder, not help, the rescue effort, and put the words "public safety" back into the communications systems we use to preserve and protect.

First responders told one reporter, "In a situation of prolonged crisis like the one in Louisiana – the time before and after the towers go down and the power goes off is as important as any other."

And they are exactly right. If New Orleans had a compatible trunk system in place like the rest of its neighbors, radios could have been reprogrammed to share surviving infrastructure within signal distance. That could have restored communications through a repeater system, instead of forcing the entire city's first responders onto two short-range 800 MHz simplex channels. (We also wonder why the EDACS ProVoice system had no back-up generator-powered temporary repeater equipment ... but that's a separate issue.)

I urge each of you who have one of these "death trap" communications systems in your community to demand that they be scrapped and a robust, interoperable system put in its place. In fact, *we should not spend one more dime of federal money for any system which is not 100 percent P25 compatible.*

Bottom line, in the shadow of the 9/11 disaster, you and I, the taxpayers of this country, have spent millions through our elected officials on communications systems and networks that, to put it plainly, failed to fulfill their primary missions. And the sad part is, our elected officials are too busy running their mouths to see what the real problems are.

Personally, I am tired of throwing money into a bottomless pit. While Congress is looking to find someone to blame, they only have to look in a mirror. If hearings are held, I hope this time they will listen to some communications experts with the courage to tell the truth about interoperability and the 700 MHz myth. Congress wields the power over our tax dollars, so it is up to them to see that those dollars are spent more wisely on compatible communications systems. Then perhaps we won't see another communications disaster like the one Hurricane Katrina spawned along the Gulf Coast of the United States.

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