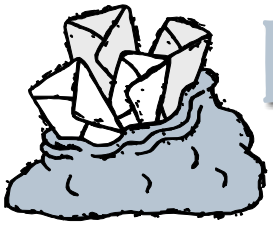

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

This column is open to your considered comments. Opinions expressed here are not necessarily those of Monitoring Times. Your letters may be rephrased or shortened for length and clarity. Please mail to Letters to the Editor, 7540 Hwy 64 West, Brasstown, NC 28902, or email editor@monitoringtimes.com

Happy monitoring!

- Rachel Baughn, KE4OPD, Editor

The World According to Emmitt KE5KZC

Editor Rachel Baughn recently carried on a running email conversation with Emmitt Jackson of Sinton, Texas. What follows are excerpts from some of Emmitt's observations of the radio world in his neck of the woods and elsewhere.

Scanning Corpus Christi

As a new transplant to this fair city, I was delighted to see the Jan issue with the article, *Scanning Corpus Christi*. When I moved here last June I was excited knowing there was a host of new stuff to hear on my scanners. Much to my dismay at not finding a *Police Call # 7* on the store shelves, I was further dismayed at finding almost all of the comms down here are on 800 MHz trunking networks, then add the fact that all EMS, fire depts, are bunched in with the police agencies.

I live in San Patricio County, city of Sinton, and though owning two triple trunking scanners, I could not hear the digital radios of my town and county, which is EDACS. So I went to Radio Shack and got one of their new multi channel table top scanners that was on sale. Lo and behold, I still could not hear them here as they are encoded, though I was able to track them! The comms are ProVoice and encrypted, so that is out.

All I can hear is the Sinton fire dept dispatch on 154.145, with tap outs; no police, no EMS or fire to hear, though here and there the fire channel will offer open transmissions on the old VHF. I went to the Sinton fire dept and noticed that the desk held two radios, one marked 'VHF old system' the other, 'new 800 system.' Also the DPS down here also use a trunked ProVoice 800 MHz, though here and there they also offer open chatter on the VHF dispatch channel.

I think they keep the old radios as the weather creates havoc here and the 800 systems seem to fail a lot.

The Ingleside base is cited for closure next year and they are shutting down the base and going to turn it over for public use, so very little coming out of there nowadays. Aransas County is pretty much gone on the VHF channels also. The city of Rockport still is current, but after radioing out they use the 800 channels for DMV checks and such and I've never been able to locate them. My freq counter keeps showing freqs in the restricted bands of my scanners, where the cellular bands are at each time they key their radios. Not sure what's going on there, only know they keep changing when the radio's keyed, far too much to be images.

Dysfunctional Gulfside Scanning

I am glad I am going back to Oregon soon. Scanners here you can't give away, Radio Shack sells none; I had to order mine on line. They don't offer freq lists like back home; it's not good hobby land here. I think there will be a day soon, that the weather will beat this land to death. As the crow flies, I am about 4 miles from the Gulf. It will be sad for those who live here, the cops won't work with the hams, no one can hear their radios, but perhaps their radios will crash and they will have to go back to the old ones – they still keep them. Talk about faith, huh?

I can't understand how we Americans seem to stand by and let these fools make new laws and govern our lives, telling us what we can listen to, what we can/cannot do with our radios. As taxpayers it's our right to know how our money gets spent. I wonder how much cash gets spent on radio systems that won't work, can't talk to each other, this mode won't tie in with that mode, all the different trunking systems, and in the end, at a time of tragedy, none of it works right and they have to resort to the old ways of tried and true? What was the point? (*That's exactly what we tracked in last month's MT - ed)*

They have so any agencies and so few repeaters down here: digital won't talk with analog. It's not "if," it's "when" it all falls apart – I, for one, think this year will be a major killer. We had no real storms last year. Texas was spared, so the housing was just built up along the water fronts, huge plate glass windows; now there they're not even putting shutters on any more. ...A huge storm surge can take out Corpus, Ingleside, Portland, Rockport, Aransas Pass, and of course Port Aransas. Then massive flooding can ruin Sinton, Taft, Gregory, and many other smaller towns for many miles inland. I wonder what the law enforcement agencies will do then.

You know I've found that even towns using UHF and counties using VHF up north seem to have interop issues. Imagine Bee, Rufuro, Jim Wells and the other counties here that are poor and can't afford 800 MHz triple tracking, more power (sorry, Tim Allen), or trunk tracking networks. I am glad I won't be here then, but I've many friends and people I care about here. It's tragic; because of stupid minds and greed, many can die over their dumb mistakes.

Meaningless Service Bands

I find it amazing how the world we know has changed. I still have five old xtal Regency scanners and one old Rat Shack analog tuner for high band. When I compare those to my BC 780, and other mutifunction/multichannel scanners I have sitting here, I can only shake my head. Here they offer me nothing other than air comms and the marine band, and I do that one with a marine radio, with a bit of railroad added.

Surprisingly I've not heard anything on MURS, nor on the dot and star freqs. FRS is busy and a bit on GMRS. I was talking to a shut-in friend, who I helped get his ham ticket. He was saying that he and his wife own two pairs of FRS/GMRS radios in their run and grab bags, but he found it tough to justify $50 for a GMRS license for the cheap walkie talkies from Wal-mart.

It got me to thinking that, yeah, those are on every corner, yet, the marine band has 88 ch radios with 25 watt transmitters and they sell them every place here. These are restricted freqs, but you don't need a ticket for those, only for the HF marine bands. ...In Newport, Oregon, a big fishing fleet town, they didn't sell marine radios any place except Englands Marine; go figure.

There is a lot of traffic on marine radios here, other than marine. There's a huge amount of farming here; Mexicans seem to use them as CBs along with, sigh, ham radios. They tend not to go on the repeaters, but use simplex.

147.08 is our Sky Warn; it's here in Sinton and a very good relay, but of late I am hearing much traffic on the backside on simplex, as I do most freqs down in 144 and lots up in the 148 areas. Surprisingly CB is pretty dead here, though Mexico booms in most of the time. We have a net on LSB36; the truckers use 19 and dirt haulers use ch 3, but for most part it's dead.

– Emmitt ke5kzc

More on HD Radios

Gary Kinsman wrote to ask for some additional or missing information in the HD Radio reviews from the June issue of *MT*. Author Ken Reitz replied as follows:

Hi Gary -

Thanks for your questions. The presets on the Acurrian were inadvertently left off (there are 24 presets: 12/AM 12/FM). Inputs, tone controls, antenna connections, performance are all given in the reviews.

There are many HD Radio table-top sets and we're trying to review as many as we can, but space is at a premium. The importance of HD sets is, "How do they sound?" That's the whole point of HD Radio.

At $200 to $600 it's doubtful that many *MT* readers will buy more than one HD Radio, so I'm trying to give readers a sense of how the radios sound and whether or not the "features" work as well as they're intended before they buy. The design of the HD Radio is that the unit will automatically switch back to analog when the digital signal drops out. That's considered a "good" feature and can't be overridden. As we present more radios you'll have more of a comparison. Thanks again for writing.

- Ken

You can see more of Ken Reitz's HD radio reviews in the July and August issues - ed.

Evaluating the Emergency Alert System

A Guest Editorial by Myles Mustoe

The failure of available communications systems to notify an entire community of an impending disaster has been much on the public mind since Hurricane Katrina. Could the activation of the Emergency Alert System (EAS) have been of value? Is the system "broken"?

I did some investigating into the importance commercial radio plays in public warning, in particular, the role of radio in responding to the derailment of a Canadian Pacific train carrying anhydrous ammonia near Minot, North Dakota, in January 2002. In that case, a glaring misconception emerged regarding the operation of the Emergency Alert System (EAS).

A nearly universal preconception exists today that the "failure of the EAS" during the Minot event was due primarily to the consequences of deregulation and corporate radio. My research on the Minot event and two additional derailments conclude that problems with the activation of the EAS had nothing to do with deregulation and everything to do with the relationship that exists between private radio stations and public emergency management organizations, and some confusion as to the purpose of the Emergency Alert System.

An Unfunded Federal Program

The intended use of the EAS has always been as a "national network" for the dissemination of a presidential announcement during a "national emergency." But this use has never been realized. Even during 9/11 (identified as an event having no threat to the entire country) the system was not activated. Most disasters are local or regional in nature. Since the advent of the Emergency Broadcast System (EBS) and now the EAS, the only use these systems have ever seen has been for emergencies at the local/regional level.

Every radio station must maintain an EAS decoder. An unfunded FCC mandate sees to that. However, the station's only legal obligation is to broadcast EAS test messages and that elusive, nationally derived presidential announcement. Thus, EAS activations that send out an Amber Alert or a severe weather announcement are all optional and voluntary. During 9/11, local and network news coverage of the event was deemed adequate by the Chairman of the FCC to "...supplant those original conceptions of a senior leader's need to talk to the people."

People Fail, Not the System

Time is money in radio and carrying EAS announcements eats up time. But, it's not necessarily the cost of an EAS box or the time it takes from programming that produces problems with the EAS. Most stations are happy to carry the EAS, as well as local emergency programming. But privately owned radio stations act only as conduits for emergency information, they do not generate it. The information must originate with public emergency management officials. What happened with the EAS (and emergency messaging in general) in Minot, ND, is an example of how both these private and public entities must work together to make the technology work.

Clearly, poor interpersonal communications existed between KCJB radio (Clear Channel Broadcasting, CCB) and local emergency managers in Minot. But, it was also apparent that emergency personnel were unfamiliar with EAS activation procedures. For example, 911 phone dispatchers informed callers to listen to the "EBS" system on their radios. (The EBS system was superceded by the EAS system in 1997.) More telling, however, is the fact that KCJB's digital EAS system could have been activated that morning by emergency managers themselves through the National Warning System (NAWAS), a dedicated phone line that existed with Minot emergency managers.

Other derailments point to similar problems. At the derailment of tank cars in Macdona, Texas, in June 2004, a plume of chlorine gas spread all the way to Sea World in San Antonio. Three people died in that event and 50 people around the San Antonio area were hospitalized. A civil emergency message (CEM) was never issued by emergency managers, nor was the EAS activated. Essential emergency programming during the event came from the news departments of local San Antonio corporate radio stations (WOAI, CCB, and KKYK Cox Radio Inc.). Their knowledge of the event came by monitoring scanner traffic!

In line with the Minot model, a similar incident occurred in January of 2005 with the derailment of chlorine tank cars at Graniteville, South Carolina. This event killed nine people, injured five hundred, and caused 5400 people to evacuate. Although an EAS activation *did* take place, it was still two hours after the event occurred. (A problem was found with the routing of the activation signal to primary local radio stations.) However, even without an EAS activation, within minutes of the initial local reports of the accident, corporate radio stations (WBBQ, WZNY, CCB) carried live news and emergency information about the event. National Weather Service radio provided a public alert in adjacent markets, but it could not act as a news outlet.

The intent here is not to vindicate the practices of corporate radio, but rather to redirect the perception that somehow corporate radio is inherently doomed when it comes to serving a local audience during times of crisis. The problem is much bigger than this. Studies have shown that the effective delivery of the EAS is complicated by a compendium of problems: convoluted state emergency management plans, complicated audio networks and poor links, bad reception from primary stations, stations not linked to the system, stress on unpaid volunteers involved in emergency communications committees, untrained personnel, poor communications between public officials and station managers, and a lack of government support.

Some public preparedness organizations are calling for the integration of the EAS into a variety of media: cell phones, televisions, the internet, etc. No doubt this will come, but following Katrina, phones, the internet and e-mail were all down in New Orleans. For that matter, major radio stations in the hardest hit areas of Katrina were off the air. But in the post-initial stage of the disaster, in Houma, LA, just outside New Orleans, KJIN part of the Guaranty Broadcasting group, simulcast live emergency programming (not just an EAS) through their cluster, around the clock to anyone with a battery operated radio.

The EAS needs critical evaluation from the bottom (local level) up. Many of its problems originate in the human interface that exists between EAS suppliers and consumers. In addition, taking the threat of human and natural disasters seriously in any size market is an integral step in honing this system.

In an interview I had with Lieutenant Fred Debowey of the Minot PD, he said, "Training is essential for dispatchers and people on the radio side. Radio stations need to get to know their local emergency management people and it is critical that the emergency management people get familiar with their media outlets."

Commercial radio stations are ubiquitous and effective messengers. Radio receivers are inexpensive and simple to operate. But unless we raise the value we place on informing the public and seriously consider the messenger's needs, we will lose a vitally important link in emergency communications to the public.

Editor's Note: Miles Mustoe's complete study can be found at: ***www.eou.edu/~mmustoe/easpapera.html***

A Government Accountability Office report on the state of the ES system was released in March 2007. You can read the report highlights on the Monitoring Times reader's website at ***www.monitoringtimes.com/mtsubscriber****.*