

## FCC and Public Safety Communications Series Memorandum

Re: The FCC and the California Fires: Another Proposal.

### Introduction

Earlier in the year, readers will recall, your Review's Public Safety Communications Office naively suggested that the FCC needed to survey what happened in the Twin Cities - - when that major interstate highway bridge collapsed. We were impressed, you see, by Minneapolis and St. Paul police and medical services personnel interviewed right after the event. Communications are critical, they all said, to marshal and deliver help. And, to notify hospitals of what to expect. And, to alert the general public. Interesting things like that.

Well, how well did wireline, wireless, and private communications networks perform in Minneapolis and St. Paul? We feel confident that your Review knows just as much about this "calamitous visitation" and its communications aspects as the FCC. Four hundred and twenty-nine million dollars and 2,200 FCC workers -- and, conducting a survey into the communications aspects the greatest recent highway disaster just isn't possible? Oh well. Man, even woman, must live on hope.

### Comes Now, the California Wildfires

Comes now, however, the California wildfires. And, it seems to us the FCC needs to survey the communications aspects of this occurrence, too -- though from a slightly different perspective. Sure, they need to know how well public and private wireline and wireless systems performed. It'd be interesting to learn, for example, whether there were problems among the various fire fighting teams, the aircraft, the emergency personnel, and the police. And, what about the Federal, state, and local personnel?

We have this suspicion that when the California state police wanted to talk with Federal Forest Service personnel they just called them on a cellphone. But maybe there's something else. Don't you think an agency with ambitions to become "emergency communications central" would want to know about these things?

### The "Reverse 911" Systems

It seems to us, too, that the FCC ought to find out how well the various "reverse 911" telephone calling systems worked. San Diego displacees all praised these warning systems. But, wouldn't you like to know who programmed them? Did they call wireline and cellphone numbers? Did they really work? And, who paid for all this?

If these systems worked so well, moreover, why isn't the FCC seriously encouraging them in other places? There are lots of places in this country where folks are at-risk, right? Again, shouldn't the FCC -- not to mention the communications industry -- have a better idea how well everything worked?

### How Well Did Broadcasters Perform?

And, we'd also like to have a full, comprehensive picture of how well the Southern California broadcasters -- radio and TV -- and cable television companies all performed.

These days, you know, the first place people turn for information about a disaster -- a "calamitous visitation" -- tends to be TV. During Katrina (and other disasters), radio and television stations acquitted themselves well. Commendably, the FCC showcased some of those efforts when they held an FCC monthly meeting at the BellSouth emergency command center in Atlanta. Remember that?

Well, we'd like to know what the broadcasters did -- and, didn't do. And, we'd also like to know if there were mistakes. Remember when, after the Nickel Mines/Amish schoolhouse tragedy, your Review suggested the FCC and broadcast associations examine the best way to cover such tragic events -- being mindful, of course, of the need not to alarm parents needlessly, or to set-off "copycat" efforts? Well, we didn't get far with that suggestion, either. Those 2,200 FCC people and their \$429 million have been oh-so-busy doing other things -- worrying about childhood obesity, newspaper-TV cross-ownership, and video news release labelling, right? You have to draw the line somewhere, right?

But the FCC -- and, Government in Washington -- needs to have more understanding (and appreciation) of the critical public warning services the broadcast and cable media provide.<sup>1</sup> Particularly when you're talking about millions of people scattered across a region, there's really no other feasible public warning alternative, is there? Again, a post-disaster survey and analysis, it seems to us, would definitely help.

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<sup>1</sup> There's also the issue of providing information to the emergency and rescue personnel themselves, isn't there? During the September 11th tragedy, for instance, we were amazed to learn -- from the CBS documentary -- how little the fire fighters in one World Trade Center tower actually knew about what had occurred. The leaders in one tower, for instance, were unaware that a second plane had hit the other tower -- even though millions of people all over the country had actually watched it, on broadcast and cable TV. That's why your Review's Public Safety Office suggest that \$49 portable TVs be placed on every fire truck in the country -- so the fire fighter can actually find out what's occurring, and not have to depend completely on their own dispatchers -- who may be (a) uninformed or (b) preoccupied with other developments. Readers will be no-doubt pleased to learn that not one fire truck in the entire United States has TV reception capability -- and, they've rejected the notion that they ought to have it.

(In Fairness, U.S. fire fighters are a remarkably pig-headed lot. Your Review recently had an argument with one group over our suggestion that every college student should be sent to school with (a) a smoke detector and (b) a fire extinguisher. The fire fighters argued that (c) all the buildings already have detectors -- untrue, especially for off-campus rental facilities. And (d) they don't want people fighting fires with extinguishers, they want them evacuating. Incidentally, the fire fighters weren't happy when we reminded them that whatever their "expertise," the United States has perhaps the worst fire safety and casualty rates among developed countries. But, as we said, trying to tell fire fighters what to do is about as fruitful as suggesting the FCC do something useful.)

### Conclusion

Now, in an ideal world, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) would actually be involved in emergency communications and how to improve them -- other than by dispensing millions of dollars to the police to buy more laptops and radio systems. But DHS is definitely a work-in-progress, isn't it? From the people who brought you the airport passenger and luggage screening system, now... . Right?

There are a number of things which the FCC could actually do, however, that'd make a real difference in this field. Former Commerce Assistant Secretary Nancy Victory, who headed an FCC-commissioned, post-Katrina survey, has talked about developing a emergency "best practices" manual. Well, wouldn't you think that surveying events and seeing what worked -- or, didn't -- would be helpful? Isn't that what the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) always tries to do?

With the terrible fires in California, the FCC has yet another chance to do something useful. Thus, we'd suggest they (a) check to see how well all the myriad public safety and other personnel communicated -- and, what systems they actually used. And (b) also check to see what Southern California broadcasters and cable system operators did to inform and warn the public. Don't you think that'd be useful? We'll let you know if we see signs of forward progress.

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