

# Frequently Asked Questions for 2021 IPAWS National Test

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FEMA, in coordination with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), will conduct [a national test of the Emergency Alert System \(EAS\) and Wireless Emergency Alerts \(WEA\)](#). The national test will consist of two portions, testing WEA and EAS capabilities. Both tests will begin at 2:20 p.m. ET on Wednesday, Aug. 11, 2021.

## 1. Why does FEMA conduct national tests of public alert and warning systems?

The IPAWS Modernization Act, 2015 (Public Law 114-143) requires the FEMA IPAWS Program Management Office to conduct, not less than once every three years, nationwide tests of the public alert and warning system.

The Act, ratified in April 2016, requires FEMA to help ensure that under all conditions the President and, except to the extent the public alert and warning system is in use by the President, Federal agencies and state, tribal, and local governments can alert and warn the civilian population in areas endangered by natural disasters, acts of terrorism, and other man-made disasters or threats to public safety.

The IPAWS office, in coordination with the FCC, tests the IPAWS's emergency communications pathways — including the Emergency Alert System and Wireless Emergency Alert. The testing process is designed to evaluate the effectiveness of the FEMA public alert and warning systems to distribute an emergency message nationwide and the operational readiness of the infrastructure for distribution of a national message to the public.

Testing will ensure an effective and reliable system exists to provide timely and accurate alerts to the public and provide information to help determine whether technological improvements are needed. After each test, an after- action report and improvement plan is created and incorporated into future testing to ensure



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Page 1 of 6

continual advancement of public alert and warning capabilities.

The test will distribute a test message nationwide through radio and television EAS participants and WEA wireless provider participants. The nationwide test will provide FEMA with valuable information on the effectiveness of sending emergency warnings via the public alert and warning system in the event of disaster.

IPAWS integrates access to the EAS, WEA, and other communications means for delivery of alerts to people from national, state, local, tribal and territorial authorities. Successful alerting requires using multiple channels to ensure the largest portion of the public possible receives the alert message. Nationwide EAS and WEA testing helps FEMA and industry participants to maintain and improve alert and warning capabilities at the federal, state, local, tribal and territorial levels and to evaluate the nation's public alert and warning capabilities.

## **2. Why is this year's test being performed in this fashion?**

In 2019 FEMA conducted a nationwide EAS test that bypassed Internet connectivity. Analyzing the results of that test we discovered a few issues which we have been working to address. The EAS portion of this year's test will again exercise EAS without relying on Internet connectivity. This will allow FEMA to document the effectiveness of the improvements implemented since 2019.

In 2018 FEMA conducted the first nationwide WEA test by sending a WEA message to every active WEA compatible wireless device in the country using the "Presidential Alert" capability designed into WEA. Since that time several new capabilities have been incorporated into WEA architecture including the ability to send test messages that are only displayed on wireless handsets where subscribers have "opted-in" to receive those test messages. This year we will use that capability to test WEA on a nationwide basis without disturbing the public.

## **3. What types of alerts are sent through Wireless Emergency Alert (WEA)?**

Five types of messages can be sent through WEA: *Imminent Threat* messages warning of extreme weather and other threatening emergencies in an area, *Public Safety* messages, *AMBER alerts*, *WEA test* messages, and *Presidential* alerts for a national emergency. (To date there has never been a Presidential WEA alert,



aside from a test message.)

#### **4. How will I know the difference between a WEA and a regular text message?**

WEA includes a special tone (some describe it as quite loud) and a vibration, both repeated twice, and special text message that appears on the mobile device screen.

#### **5. Does a member of the public sign up for WEA alerts?**

No, a person does not need to sign up to receive a WEA alert, but the person would need to subscribe to a cell phone service. In addition, only consumers who have opted-in on their phone to receive WEA test messages will receive this test message.

#### **6. Why will some phones receive the alert and others will not?**

Only WEA-compatible cell phones that have been opted-in to receive WEA test messages, are switched on and within range of an active cell tower, and whose wireless carrier participates in WEA will be capable of receiving the test message. WEA messages will not interrupt ongoing voice calls.

#### **7. Will an international visitor to United States receive the WEA test message?**

Since WEA is based on global standards, some international visitors will be able to receive the WEA test alert. Others will not, depending on the capabilities of their handset. In addition, only consumers who have opted-in on their phone to receive WEA test messages will receive this test message.

#### **8. What language will the WEA test be in?**

The WEA test will appear in English or Spanish depending on the language selected for the phone's main menu.

#### **9. What if a real-world event happens on test day?**



If an event occurs on August 11, 2021 that makes the test impractical, the back-up date for the test is August 25, 2021.

## **10. What are the benefits of testing?**

The national tests assess IPAWS message delivery pathways, and encourage communication and strengthened relationships between the broadcast, wireless and emergency management communities. Ultimately, information obtained from the tests increases awareness, understanding, and adoption of IPAWS by all partners and the public.

## **11. What is FEMA doing to make the test message more accessible?**

The IPAWS Program Management Office (PMO) is exploring several initiatives to make national tests more widely accessible to those with access and functional needs, and limited English proficiency. The IPAWS PMO is working with all participants and stakeholders to identify and engage with public- and private-sector organizations with the capability to make emergency message dissemination more effective, inclusive, and resilient.

The FEMA IPAWS PMO continues to explore the capability to relay messages in additional languages. Testing efforts in 2015 marked the first time that IPAWS was used to deliver a National Periodic Test to the EAS in both English and Spanish. Radio and TV EAS participants could broadcast the message in either Spanish, English or both to support the primary language of their typical audience.

When internet connectivity is available IPAWS can provide emergency message content in multiple languages, if provided by the alert originator, for connected private-sector systems that ultimately deliver the messages to people.

EAS participants (radio and TV stations) and wireless providers participating in WEA comply with FCC rules for the accessibility of emergency messages.

WEA's special alert tone and vibration cadence was designed to help ensure the accessibility of alerts by hearing impaired mobile phone users. Further enhancements to WEA in 2019 allowed for mobile phones to display Spanish-language alert messages if provided by the alert originator.

## **12. When was the most recent nationwide EAS Test?**



Previous nationwide EAS tests were conducted in 2011, 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019.

**13. What other WEA tests have been conducted to date?**

State and local alerting authorities occasionally conduct WEA tests in their localities in accordance with the FCC's regulations. One prior nationwide WEA test occurred in 2018. But the August 2021 test is the first nationwide WEA test to occur on an opt-in basis.

**14. Will I be charged for receiving this test alert?**

No, you will not be charged for this test alert.

**15. Will the test alert be used to gather my private data?**

No, both EAS and WEA are broadcast technologies and do not collect any of your data. This test is strictly designed to evaluate the effectiveness of the systems sending an emergency message.

**16. Does WEA know where I am?**

No. WEA is not capable of tracking the location of anyone receiving a WEA alert.

**17. Will I receive the WEA test message if I'm visiting an area where I don't live, or outside the area where my phone is registered?**

Yes, if you have a WEA-capable phone and your wireless carrier participates in the program. More than 100 carriers participate, including the largest carriers.

**18. Where can I provide feedback?**

FEMA invites members of the public who experienced the EAS test on radio or TV, or configured their phone to receive WEA Test messages prior to the National Test to send comments to [FEMA-National-Test@fema.dhs.gov](mailto:FEMA-National-Test@fema.dhs.gov):

- Whether your radio or television announced and displayed the EAS test message in an understandable manner
- Whether your mobile device displayed one, more or no WEA test messages
- The make, model and operating system version of your mobile device



- Your wireless service provider
- Whether the device was turned on and in the same location for at least 30 minutes after the start of the test (2:20 p.m. ET)
- The location of the device (as precise as possible), including the device's environment (e.g. indoors or outdoors, rural or urban, mobile or stationary)
- Whether you are normally able to make calls, receive texts, or use apps at that location
- Whether the mobile device was in use at the time of the alert (for a call or a data session) and
- Whether anyone else with a WEA Test-enabled phone at your location received the WEA test alert message.

**19. What other outreach and engagement activities can we expect before the next FEMA-administered EAS-WEA Test?**

FEMA, in coordination with federal partners and EAS and WEA participants, will continue to provide timely updates through virtual roundtables, webinars, conferences, and other events. For more information contact: [ipaws@fema.dhs.gov](mailto:ipaws@fema.dhs.gov).

**20. How do I know if I've opted in to receive WEA tests? How do I opt in?**

When you buy a new wireless phone, the "State/Local" WEA test option is disabled. The method for opting in to receive WEA tests varies by phone. Check with your phone manufacturer or wireless provider for details.

**21. Who decides when a Presidential Alert can be transmitted and how does that happen?**

The President has sole responsibility for determining when a national-level alert or warning will be activated. In the event of a national emergency, a national warning message would be issued at the direction of the President and/or his/her designee and activated by FEMA.

