

TIP 41: WEA Geo-Targeting & 360 Characters

Wireless Emergency Alerts (WEAs) gained several enhancements in December 2019. These include the ability to target mobile phones within a polygon with limited overshoot, and to send 360-character messages. This should improve confidence that alerts can reach the intended audience, while expanding alert content. Where do we stand today with these enhancements?

How many mobile phones support Enhanced Geo-Targeting?

In July 2021 the Cellular Telecommunications and Internet Association (CTIA) found that only 34% of active smartphones support Enhanced Geo-Targeting. The CTIA projects that number to grow over 2022, but a large percentage of mobile phones do not currently support Enhanced Geo-Targeting.

What does this mean for you? Mobile phones tens of miles outside of the targeted alert polygon area could receive the alert. The amount of overreach can vary, depending on such factors as terrain and tower location. Additionally, consumers who have disabled location-based services for their phone could continue to receive alerts tens of miles from the targeted alert area even if they have a newer phone.

In time, all mobile phones will support Enhanced Geo-Targeting, either through software upgrades or new purchases, but until technology catches up, alerts may be received outside of the targeted polygon.

What is Enhanced Geo-Targeting?

Enhanced Geo-Targeting is designed to deliver alerts to 100% of WEA-capable mobile phones inside the targeted area and not alerting mobile phones that are more than 1/10 mile (528 feet) outside the targeted area.

Wireless providers send the geographic boundaries of the target area with the WEA message that is broadcast from cell sites near that area. Newer mobile phones that receive a WEA with geographic information then use the device location functions to determine whether the mobile phone is inside or outside of the target area.

90 characters is required to send a WEA

360 characters is optional. However, the public often complains that the 90-character message alone is terse and incomplete. The 360-character field is there for a reason. As many mobile phones in use today support 360 characters, IPAWS encourages you to leverage this added space. Use it to provide more complete information, or to include a web address for example.

How long will 90-character WEAs be required?

Because some mobile phones still do not support 360 characters, we absolutely want to ensure the maximum number of people get an alert. Therefore, IPAWS will continue to impose the 90-character requirement for the foreseeable future. IPAWS will notify Alerting Authorities of any changes in this regard.



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