

COMMERCIAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE

'Buy a Weather Radio'

"Buy a weather radio." That's a direct order from the general—General Russell L. Honoré. During his opening session keynote speech at the 74th Annual APCO Conference and Exposition, he repeatedly "ordered" everyone in attendance to "buy a weather radio."

Honoré asked attendees, "How many of you are ready for a disaster? How many of you have weather radios? A key part of being prepared is being informed. I know you are communications gurus, and during the day, you got all your stuff on you. What happens when you go to bed at night? And that tornado comes in the middle of the night or the terrorist attack happens in the middle of the night. Who's gonna wake you and your family up? Get weather radios. A NOAA radio, so you can stay informed. ... You need to have one!"

So what was Honoré talking about? The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) National Weather Radio (NWR) system is a nationwide government network of radio towers that broadcasts warnings, watches and other hazard information 24 hours a day on seven different VHF-radio frequencies, from 162.400 MHz to 162.550 MHz. In 2004, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) announced that it would use this network to issue terrorist attack alerts. The network is the single source for information about hazards, both natural and civil.

This year, the National Weather Service (NWS) has reached a historic milestone. With the addition of a transmitter in Nenana, Alaska, the NOAA Weather Radio All Hazards Network has 1,000 transmitter stations. Now, the network can reach more than 95% of the U.S. popu-

lation. Weather radio alert receivers are readily available for individuals so they can receive a full range of emergency warnings 24/7, but most people don't have them or even know they exist.

What's transmitted? More than 80 different messages are transmitted over the NWR system. Weather radios equipped with a special alarm provide audible and visual alerts to give you immediate information. According to the national response plan, the NWS will also broadcast non-weather emergency messages when public safety is involved, the message comes from an official government source and time is critical. All-hazards public warning messages include information about natural disasters (tornadoes, hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, etc.), technological accidents (chemical releases, oil spills, nuclear power plant emergencies, maritime accidents, train derailments, etc.), AMBER alerts and terrorist attacks.

Selecting a radio: Weather radios are divided into two major categories: industrial/commercial grade and residential units. Both types receive the NOAA broadcasts. Commercial units are available on the Internet and from land mobile communications dealers. Residential units are also available online but can be purchased from over-the-counter sources, such as home centers; and hardware, electronics and office supply stores. Residential receivers

can be portable handheld units or desktop models.

If your agency, local business or school is purchasing a unit, they should select the commercial grade receiver. If the radio is for personal use or a gift, the residential units are the most cost-effective, ranging in price from \$30 to \$125. Review a list of commercial and residential units at www.nws.noaa.gov/nwr/nwrrcvr.htm.

Not all units are the SAME: Commercial and residential weather radios have been around for many years, and all were originally activated by a single tone common for all NWS offices around the country. This structure created the possibility that some units would be alerted to severe weather conditions that were outside their area. This problem became more pronounced when the warning areas that most NWS offices were responsible for increased in size due to the consolidation of offices.

The result: A new encoding scheme was introduced to selectively alert specific counties, rather than all receivers within the NWS transmitter coverage area. The Specific Area Message Encoding (SAME) digital scheme is used throughout the U.S., in addition to the single tone alert for older receivers. To take advantage of the SAME technology, purchase a weather radio that receives and decodes the SAME digital messages. Users can then program the

new weather radios to alert for just one or multiple counties. Each county is designated by a SAME code used to program the receiver. The list of all SAME codes is available at www.nws.noaa.gov/nwr/indexnw.htm#sametable.

Special features: Most units have backup battery power, but some units offer

NOAA Honors Honoré

In 2007, NOAA awarded General Russell L. Honoré its Mark Trail Award for his leadership efforts in preparing communities at large for the next major disaster. Honoré has worked diligently in the private sector, and with community churches, civic clubs and at town meetings to raise awareness about individual preparedness responsibilities. At the top of his list of responsibilities is owning a weather radio and giving one to your loved ones.

additional features, such as antenna connectors that permit external base antenna use in fringe coverage areas or in a basement. Others have outputs that can drive optional sirens or strobe lights to accommodate special needs. Some have USB ports that interconnect to your computer systems for programming and providing alert information.

Many people and organizations have

excuses for why they think they don't need a weather radio. Some common excuses: "I can turn on the TV and get Weather Channel any time"; "I can pick up the weather broadcasts on my scanner, AM/FM, GMRS/FRS, CB and or marine radio." Remember Honoré's question: "In the middle of the night, who's gonna wake you and your family up?" Buy a weather radio, and that's an order.

~ **DON WHITNEY**, is a past chair and current vice chair of the APCO Commercial Advisory Committee, a Senior Member and a Life Member of APCO, and an active member of the Executive Council and the Professional Development Events Committee. He has more than 40 years of public safety communications experience, initially working as a telecommunicator. He recently retired from Motorola as a marketing executive and is currently working for HICAPS. Contact him at dwhitney@ameritech.net.

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