

## Filling an Important Communication Gap

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One of the primary challenges we have in California's San Marcos Pass area is to keep the public informed about flooding, wildland fires, traffic congestion, evacuations and major events. These notifications must be timely and, above all, accurate.

With hundreds of television and radio stations and the Internet, one would think getting emergency information to the public would not be an issue. However, this is not the case. The primary problem is most of these stations are, to a large extent, automated. If something happens on a weekend or holiday, emergency managers are essentially on their own in trying to communicate with the public.

Winter 2005 opened with a vengeance in the San Marcos Pass of Santa Barbara County. Lack of reliable information regarding local landslides, freeway conditions and severe traffic problems from road closures finally became the last straw for the mountain community; because wildfires during the previous summer had caused area residents a similar problem. Getting accurate information from public officials during these emergencies had been, at best, difficult.

To perpetuate the problem, after the crises, local public information officers blamed commercial broadcasters; and broadcasters blamed PIOs. We held several community meetings, but no one had a solution. As an outgrowth of frustration on all sides, a group called Emergency Public Information Communicators Association (EPIC) was formed, composed of public safety agencies, transportation departments, public health groups, the Red Cross, Santa Barbara County Family Support Agency 2-1-1 Services, etc. This became a turning point from which solutions began to grow.

The Wildland Residents Asso-

ciation (WRA)-San Marcos Pass Volunteer Fire Department began working with EPIC, the Santa Barbara Fire Safe Council, other public safety agencies and local commercial broadcasters on one idea in particular: emergency advisory radio.

Research into the matter had revealed that the advisory radio concept, around since the early 1970s (commonly used by departments of transportation and national parks) had, in recent years, evolved into an "emergency advisory radio system" concept of fixed and mobile stations, synchronizable in multi-station groups – each station in the growable group covering 25-75 square miles. Broadcasting on FCC-dedicated channels (530-1700 kHz) in the AM band, the systems are inexpensive (about \$20K each) and easy for emergency managers themselves to use to reach specific areas with specific messages. We thought, why not create an emergency advisory radio system for San Marcos Pass communities?

After much investigation, the WRA selected Information Station Specialists (ISS) as its vendor of choice. A grant was awarded to cover costs for a fixed ALERT AM<sup>®</sup> station overlooking the Pass. Within four months, the San Marcos Pass Emergency Radio System (SMPERS)-1040 AM went on the air. The station now provides public service announcements from various state and local agencies. It has already been used for evacuation drills, road closures, landslides and wildfire emergencies.

SMPERS-1040 covers the entire Pass with only six watts of signal. We script and professionally record all broadcasts. Participating local agencies can call announcements into a voicemail-like digital programmer. Emergency messages override general programming,

providing immediate notification to the public directly from the field. The station is equipped to automatically rebroadcast relevant warnings from the NOAA Emergency Alert/Weather System, using Specific-Area Message Encoding that ensures only messages for our county are rebroadcast. The station can store hundreds of pre-recorded messages for immediate use and can handle live updates. We also record various public safety announcements on selected tracks to play as required.

A notable side benefit is the ability of commercial broadcasters to pull emergency information off the station for wider broadcasting, providing on-the-scene information. Public relations, marketing and cooperation with other agencies have made the SMPERS program extraordinarily successful. We remain on good terms with local broadcasters versus competing with them; as an example, they often provide voice talent that keeps our programming professional sounding. Several local electrical vendors have helped, and ISS is always accessible for technical support. In cooperation with the Santa Barbara Fire Safe Council, the WRA supervises station operations, including policies, standards and practices.

Emergency advisory radio fills an important gap in our overall program: reaching our community and motorists with critical information, particularly related to wildfires and evacuations. The WRA received a grant for our system. However, if grant-writing seems prohibitive, managers can build minimal costs for emergency advisory radio stations right into other public projects, such as new schools, fire stations and city halls. We as emergency managers must rely on ourselves, in more ways than one, to reach our own constituencies.