Integrated Public Alert and Warning System

Wireless Emergency Alerts

In weather emergencies, warnings can save lives. But traditional warning methods such as television, radio and outdoor sirens don't always reach everyone.

Beginning in June 2012, emergency officials will have a new way to send warnings directly to cell phones in affected areas — Wireless Emergency Alerts (WEAs).

These short messages may look like a text message, but unlike texts, which are sent directly to your phone number, these warnings will be broadcast to all phones within range of designated cell towers through the Commercial Mobile Alert System (CMAS).

The alerts will tell you the type of warning, the affected area, and the duration. You'll need to turn to other sources, such as television or your NOAA All-Hazards radio, to get more detailed information about what is happening and what actions you should take

For illustration only. Actual message appearance will vary.

Key Things to Know:

- WEA messages may look like a text, or appear over your home screen.
- The alert message will include a unique ringtone and vibration.
- You will never be charged for WEA messages.
- Emergency alerts will not interrupt any calls or downloads in progress. If you're on the phone when the alert goes out, you'll get the message when you end your call.
- You need not have GPS or any other special features turned on to receive the alerts.
- The system does not identify your location or phone number — it simply sends the message to all devices in a given area.
- If you're on the road and enter an area with an active warning, you'll receive a WEA message as soon as you come within range of one of the affected cell towers.

Is your phone ready for WEA?

If you have an older model phone, you may not receive the Wireless Emergency Alerts. Some, such as newer-model iPhone and Android phones, will soon receive software updates that add this feature.

Check with your service provider to find out if your phone is WEA-capable. AT&T, Cricket, Sprint, T-Mobile and Verizon all have information about the new alert system on their websites. Search for WEA (Wireless Emergency Alerts) or CMAS (Commercial Mobile Alert System) to find your provider's list of WEA-capable phones.

Wireless
Emergency
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Cell tower geography may lead to overwarning

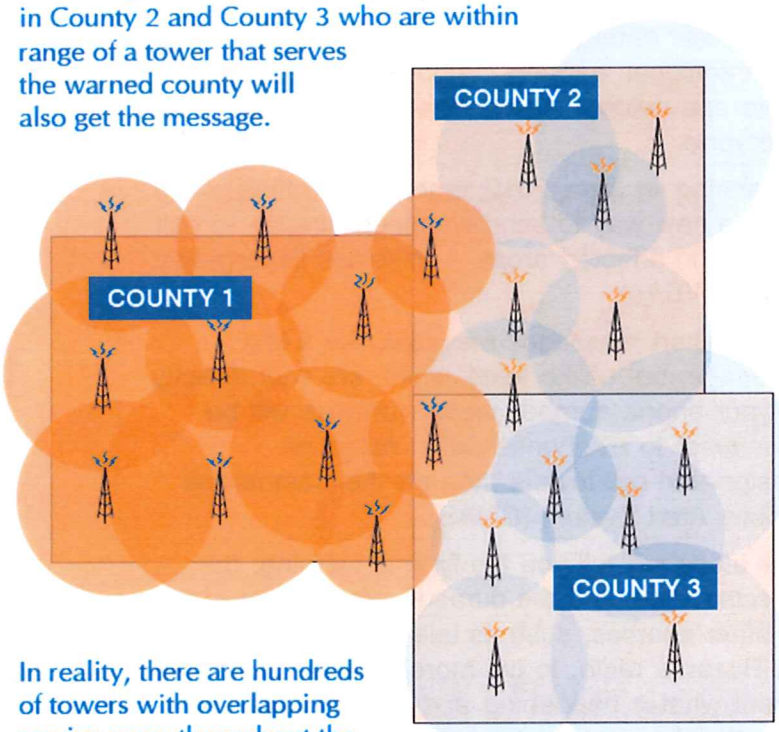
Because cell towers broadcast in a radius, or circle, their coverage areas don't line up neatly with county boundaries. This means you may receive warnings for an adjacent county if you're within a few miles of the border.

The alerts are delivered directly from cell tower to cell phone through a one-way broadcast. The Commercial Mobile Alert System does not track or locate individual cell phones or phone numbers — it simply broadcasts to all phones within range. Unfortunately, in some cases, this may result in overwarning.

For example, if a tornado warning is issued for a particular county, it will go to all towers that serve that county.

Towers in urban areas generally serve a radius of two to five miles, and in rural areas up to 10 miles, so the warning message may reach a little beyond the warning boundaries.

As this simplified illustration shows, when a warning is issued for County 1, people in County 2 and County 3 who are within range of a tower that serves the warned county will also get the message.



In reality, there are hundreds of towers with overlapping service areas throughout the Kansas City area.

Wireless Emergency Alerts: Three Types of Warnings

The Commercial Mobile Alert System (CMAS) can be used to broadcast three types of emergency alerts:

- **PRESIDENTIAL ALERTS** — Issued by the U.S. President in the event of a nationwide emergency.
- **IMMINENT THREAT ALERTS** — Typically issued by the National Weather Service; in the Portland metropolitan area, these would include tornado, flash flooding, ice storm, tsunami, and blizzard warnings.
- **AMBER ALERTS** — Issued by law enforcement to share information about a child abduction.

No president has ever yet had to issue a presidential alert, but should one become necessary, cell phone providers are required to broadcast it to all WEA-capable phones.

Cell phone users may choose to opt out of imminent threat and/or AMBER alerts, but the procedures vary by carrier. Some providers will allow customers to opt out of one or the other, while others only allow you to opt out of both. Contact your wireless provider for more information.

The Emergency Management community strongly encourages all residents not to opt out of these potentially life-saving messages.

To learn more, contact your local emergency management office or wireless service provider. Visit www.ready.gov for more information on emergency preparedness.