

PROMETHEUS RADIO PROJECT

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Low Power FM Radio: An Essential Component of an Expanded United States National Alert System

For five years, America's churches, schools, municipalities, and nonprofit organizations have been building neighborhood radio – low power FM (LPFM) stations – to enrich public debate and strengthen democracy. Over that time, and especially after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, these stations have more than proven their worth to communities at risk from natural disasters or other threats.

Low power FM radio is endorsed by a bipartisan group representing millions of Americans, including the Future of Music Coalition, Free Press, the National Association of Evangelicals, the United Council of Catholic Bishops, the Christian Coalition, and the National Hispanic Media Coalition. Now, as we mark the one-year anniversary of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, legislators have a chance to expand this essential community radio service as a part of Senate Bill 1753 – the WARN act.

What is the WARN act?

In September of 2005, Senator Jim DeMint of South Carolina introduced the Warning, Alert, and Response Network Act. This bill would establish a nationwide National Alert System, expanding on the current Emergency Alert System, and allowing communications providers -- such as cell phone companies, digital TV broadcasters, and traditional radio stations – to get essential news and alerts out in times of emergency. From local officials to the United States President, this system would allow consumers of a variety of technologies to get lifesaving information when they need it most. A parallel bill exists in the House of Representatives, cosponsored by Congressmen Shimkus and Wynn (HB 5785).

How does WARN improve upon the existing Emergency Alert System?

WARN gives officials and emergency responders the power to transmit extremely localized alerts (**Sec. 2**), vital when a chemical spill, the eyewall of a hurricane, or a tornado is moving through a town. It provides for an working group of industry officials, government regulators, and other experts to design and manage the system between the appropriate agencies (**Sec. 4**), and ensures that local, regional, and state officials, as well as national, get the training necessary to warn our communities through the system in times of disaster (**Sec. 7**).

How do LPFM radio stations make the current provisions of WARN more effective?

Senator DeMint and the other original cosponsors of WARN have included provisions on

the bill which would be aptly served by low power FM radio stations:

1. WARN also includes language which stresses that community members should not have to rely on a particular type of consumer technology to receive the essential warnings of the National Alert System. When cell phone towers fail, Americans often get their emergency information from traditional analog radio. Many emergency survival kits include battery-powered radios.
2. In today's media market, teams of commercial engineers often provide the technical support for 4-8 radio stations in a single market; meaning that these tech teams have a big job on their hands after a hurricane, getting these stations back on the air. Sometimes these engineers live tens if not hundreds of miles away from their station. LPFM stations are often run by volunteers who have to understand their technology to keep it going. After Hurricane Katrina, two of the four stations that stayed on the air in the Gulf of Mexico were low power FM stations (**WQRZ-LP, Hancock County Amateur Radio Association, Inc., Bay St. Louis, MS; WGON-LP, Crisis Pregnancy Help Center Of Slidell Inc., Slidell, LA**)
3. LPFM stations are uniquely able to cover extremely localized crises for neighborhoods, small towns, and rural communities. When hurricanes came right through the center of Jupiter, Florida, **WJTW-LP** was able to provide block-by-block coverage of the progress of the storm through the town. Other radio coverage was coming from Ft. Lauderdale and Boca Raton, over 50 miles away.

How would we need to amend WARN to allow more of these stations to be built?

Only about 750 low power FM stations are currently on the air, because of early industry concerns that the service would interfere with full power FM broadcasts. But an independent study commissioned by the FCC has proved that there is plenty of room for LPFM in hundreds, if not thousands, more communities, from big cities to small towns. Senators could act to expand low power FM as part of WARN's national alert system by adding language into the bill that takes that study into account, and gives the FCC back the power to license more LPFMs to churches, schools, and nonprofit organizations.

Does language already exist in other legislation that would expand low power FM radio?

In 2005, Senator McCain introduced S312 – <http://prometheusradio.org/s312> – that would expand low power FM to many more communities across the United States. The language from this bill was introduced, and successfully passed, onto a major telecommunications bill earlier this summer – Senate Bill 2686. SB2686, with over 200 amendments, covers complicated and controversial issues, such as net neutrality and how video delivery services will work. Low power FM broadcasters are generally in support of the provisions of WARN as they currently stand.

What can I do to support stronger emergency communications services in my district?

Support the expansion of low power FM radio. Congressmembers and Senators can amend the respective versions of the WARN act to expand low power FM to churches, schools, emergency responders, and community organizations across the United States. To learn more, visit <http://www.prometheusradio.org>.