

Wireless Emergency Alert Enhancements

FAQs for Authorized Alert Originators

Over the years, the Federal Communications Commission has periodically taken important measures to promote the effectiveness of Wireless Emergency Alerts (WEA), and to make such messages more accessible. Some of these measures are described below. These measures are available for use by alert originators today.

Expanding from 90-character to 360-character WEA Messages

Q. What does it mean when I hear that WEA supports 360 characters?

- You can now include more characters of text in your WEA alerts. WEA alerts used to be limited to 90 characters. That is less than a Tweet. They can now include up to 360 characters. Alert originators can use these additional characters to communicate more information to the public about emergencies. The additional characters also enable alert originators to communicate more clearly, without relying on potentially confusing jargon or abbreviations.

Q. Can I now send WEA messages that allow for up to 360 characters to my community?

- Yes, provided that your alert origination software supports this enhancement. Please note:
 - People with WEA-capable mobile devices connected to 4G-LTE or future wireless networks will have an opportunity to receive the full 360 characters of freeform text that you provide. People whose WEA-capable mobile devices are connected to older networks, however, may receive a 90-character message.
 - Most wireless usage occurs on 4G-LTE networks. As a result, the majority of your community is likely to receive your full 360-character alert.
 - Contact your alert origination software provider if you are unsure whether your software is up to date to allow you to take advantage of this WEA enhancement, or if your alert origination software does not yet support this WEA enhancement and you wish to use it.

Q. Since some members of the public will not be able to receive 360-character WEA alerts, should I also continue to send alerts in 90 characters?

- Yes. Alert originators must continue to send 90-character versions of their alerts to ensure that everyone in their community is able to receive a version of it. They may also send a 360-character version to communicate additional information more clearly to those that are able to receive it. That is entirely your choice.
- If you initiate a 90- and a 360-character version of the same alert using freeform text, wireless providers that participate in WEA will send your 90-character version to people connected to older networks and your 360-character version to people connected to newer networks.

Public Safety Messages

Q. What are Public Safety Messages? When should I use them?

- Public Safety Messages are a new class of Wireless Emergency Alerts that you can use only in connection with Imminent Threat or AMBER Alerts to recommend steps that the public should take to save lives or property. Public Safety Messages will enable you to send actionable, potentially life-saving information to your communities to supplement or otherwise provide

additional information related to the Imminent Threat or AMBER Alert message you have already sent. The availability of Public Safety Messages gives alert originators the ability to provide additional information to their communities during emergencies when that information is essential to saving lives or property but does not meet the criteria for issuing an Imminent Threat or AMBER Alert.

- For example, if you sent an Imminent Threat Alert to your community in anticipation of a hurricane, and you later learn that the hurricane has damaged your community's potable water supply, you can send a Public Safety Message to direct your community to boil their water before drinking it. You can send that boil water guidance as a Public Safety Message, even if it would not meet the criteria for the issuance of an Imminent Threat Alert.
- If you're not sure whether it's appropriate to issue a Public Safety Message, ask yourself the following four questions:
 - Is your emergency operations center activated?
 - Has a competent, authorized party declared a state of emergency and/or are emergency orders being issued?
 - In order to promote public safety, is there a need for broad public action or awareness of a condition that is occurring or likely to occur?
 - Will the message prevent public fear or serve to preserve critical public safety functions that are (or could be) overwhelmed (e.g., inappropriate use of 911)?

If the answer to any of these questions is "yes," it may be appropriate to send a Public Safety Message. Keep in mind that you can only send a Public Safety Message in connection with an Imminent Threat or AMBER Alert.

Q. Will my community receive Public Safety Messages just like any other WEA alert?

- Not necessarily. Like Imminent Threat and AMBER Alerts, your community can opt out of receiving Public Safety Messages if they do not wish to receive them.
- Wireless providers in your area may offer their customers the ability to turn off Public Safety Messages during certain hours or may deliver Public Safety Messages with a different sound or vibration than other WEA alerts.

Spanish-language Alerts

Q. Can the WEA system or wireless providers translate my English-language alerts into Spanish for me?

- No. You, as the alert originator, are responsible for your alert message content. Neither FEMA, nor wireless providers, nor consumer mobile devices will translate your English-language WEA message into a WEA message in another language for you. We encourage you to plan accordingly.

Q. I want to send a Spanish-language version of an alert to those members of my community that speak Spanish, but I don't want everyone to receive it. Is that possible?

- Yes. You should expect that the Spanish-language version of your alert will be presented only on consumer mobile devices whose default language is set to Spanish.

State and Local WEA Tests

Q. How do the new WEA enhancements change how I test WEA in my community?

- The new WEA enhancements include a State/Local WEA Test option. State/Local WEA Tests must include conspicuous language sufficient to make clear to the public that the message is, in fact, only a test. Your community will be opted out of receiving State/Local WEA Tests by default. Your community will need to affirmatively opt in to receiving State/Local WEA Tests

using their mobile device's WEA interface if they wish to participate in your tests and exercises. We encourage you to plan accordingly.

Q. How can my community affirmatively opt in to receive State/Local WEA Tests?

- Consumers can opt in to receiving State/Local WEA Tests on their mobile devices. This functionality is generally available within device settings, but the exact means vary by mobile device or provider.

Q. Do I need to do anything in advance of sending a State/Local WEA Test?

- You should engage in extensive outreach to your community to socialize the benefits of public participation in State/Local WEA Tests and to raise public awareness about the benefits of receiving WEA test messages.
 - This outreach should include coordinating with local leadership, wireless providers that offer service within your area, public information officers, and other emergency authorities that operate within and adjacent to the testing area. Specifically, first responder organizations such as police and fire agencies and 911 call centers should be aware of your test to ensure that they can confirm to the public that the WEA message is, in fact, only a test.
 - You should also engage in pre-test publicity efforts, including public outreach through press releases and social media, to apprise the public of the upcoming WEA test and how to opt in to receive the test, as well as the benefits of WEA if an actual emergency arise.

Q. I want to conduct a WEA Test, but I don't want to disturb everyone in my community. What can I do?

- Unlike other types of alerts, your community is opted out of receiving State/Local WEA Tests by default. The only people in your community who will receive these test messages are those who have affirmatively opted in to receiving them.
- There is another option available. Your alert origination software is connected to the FEMA Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS) Lab so that you can do proficiency training exercises that do not reach the public.

Q. Do I need to request a waiver from the FCC to conduct a WEA Test?

- Not if you use the State/Local WEA Test option. The FCC's rules permit authorized alert originators to send State/Local WEA Tests without requesting a waiver from the FCC. The FCC's rules otherwise require authorized alert originators to request a waiver to use the WEA Attention Signal.

Geographic Accuracy of WEA

Q. What is the FCC doing to improve the geographic accuracy of WEA alerts?

- When the WEA program launched, participating wireless providers were generally required to send alerts to a geographic area no larger than the county or counties affected by the emergency. As of November 2017, however, all participating wireless providers were required to transmit alerts to a geographic area that best approximates the area the alert originator specifies, even if it is smaller than a county. In addition, beginning December 19, 2019, participating wireless providers must improve geo-targeting of alerts even further. By that date, when you initiate an alert with a delivery area that is specified by using a polygon or circle, wireless providers must "match" the specified target area and deliver alerts to the area you specify with no more than a one-tenth of a mile overshoot. Note that wireless providers will

continue to deliver the alert to an area that best approximates the target area in instances where they are technically incapable of matching it, such as for mobile devices without location services enabled or when part of the target area is outside of a wireless provider's coverage area.

Preservation of WEA Alerts

Q. What does it mean that WEA alerts will now be preserved?

- Consumer mobile devices previously took varying approaches to providing access to WEA alerts after the user had viewed and dismissed them. Now, all WEA-capable mobile devices will preserve alerts on the device so that they are accessible for at least 24 hours or until the user deletes them. The ability to go back and review alert message content is more important than ever, given other recent WEA improvements that enable alerts to contain additional information.

Embedded References

Q. What is an embedded reference?

- An embedded reference is data, like a hyperlinked URL or phone number, that an alert recipient can click to perform an action related to the alert. For example, an AMBER Alert could include a hyperlink that directs the alert recipient to a webpage containing further information about a missing child. Or, a Public Safety Message could offer the public an alternative 10-digit number to call to reach emergency services after a hurricane causes a 9-1-1 outage.

Q. Why should I use embedded references in my WEA alerts?

- The availability of embedded content empowers emergency managers to offer the public alerts that can direct them to more comprehensive emergency response resources, including multimedia such as pictures or maps showing evacuation routes. Including an authoritative URL in an alert can lead to swifter community response, improve accessibility, facilitate the public's use of 9-1-1 services, and provide alert originators with a method to update the public on fast-developing events.

Q. Are there best practices for using embedded references in WEA alerts?

- We urge emergency managers to continue to convey the most important actionable information through the message text. This will ensure that all members of the public are able to receive that information, even if they are unable to access the URL.
- We urge all alert originators to take appropriate steps to ensure that the web resource to which an embedded URL directs the public has sufficient capacity to handle increased consumer traffic.
- We urge emergency managers to consider the capacity of their call centers or hotlines before embedding a phone number in an Alert Message.