

What Certification Means

Arlington, Va. — Public Alert- certified radios meet voluntary Consumer Electronics Association (CEA) 2009 performance standards finalized in December 2003 by the association in cooperation with the National Weather Service (NWS) and NOAA, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

NOAA is expanding the mission of its national network of 884 NOAA Weather Radio (NWR) broadcast towers to alert citizens not only to severe weather conditions but also to other types of emergencies, including biological, radiological and chemical hazards; civil emergencies; contagious-disease outbreaks; and even America's Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response (Amber) alerts.

Before then, the NWR network in only a handful of states, including Washington, warned listeners of non-weather-related hazards, largely as a result of the individual states' own initiatives, said RadioShack product development director Dwayne Campbell. In addition, in June 2004, the Department of Commerce in which NOAA is located and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) signed a memorandum of understanding to permit DHS direct access to the NWR network in the event of a terrorist act to transmit warnings. Congress has also mandated through appropriations that NOAA weather radios be placed in public schools throughout the country. DHS recently responded by issuing a request for quote for a pilot program for this purpose.

As part of its 2003 transformation into a nationwide all-hazards network, NWR effectively extended the benefits of its Specific Area Message Encoding (SAME) capability throughout its footprint.

With SAME capability, NWR radios can be programmed by consumers to wake up from standby mode and issue audible and visual warnings only when an alert for their specific county is issued and when a national or statewide alert is issued. Consumers can also program their unit to wake up only when warnings of specific types of events are broadcast.

SAME-enabled receivers let consumers filter out warnings of events that might threaten areas many miles away, Campbell explained, and it lets consumers screen out warnings of county-level events that might not directly affect them. Consumers living on mountaintops, for example, could screen out flood warnings for low-lying areas.

The CEA performance standards include mandatory SAME capability with automatic wake-up mode and the ability to recognize up to 78 SAME codes. The performance standards also include a minimum sensitivity requirement that enables reception up to 50 miles from a transmitter over flat terrain, said Campbell.

The standards also provide consistency in the behavior of different brands and models of certified radios, Campbell said. For example, certified radios won't wake up and issue a

false alert when a NWR broadcast site switches from its primary transmitter to a backup transmitter.

The standard also allows for optional codes and a variety of alert options, including an audible alarm to wake up consumers at night when an alert is received. Lights and text alerts are also options.

Any consumer electronics product can be equipped to meet Public Alert standards; Thomson televisions did for a while.

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