

CHAPTER 6: LACK OF NOAA WEATHER RADIO AWARENESS A CONTINUING PROBLEM—EVEN WITHIN GOVERNMENT

There is some reason to wonder just how aware even our national Homeland Security office may be of the potential of NOAA Weather Radio. An executive with one of the weather-radio receiver makers, another source who insisted on remaining unnamed, described a meeting late last year with the Homeland Security staff at which the capabilities of NOAA Weather Radio were demonstrated. A consumer receiver was placed on a table, and various warning messages were fired across the room to it from a small, hand-held transmitter fabricated for the occasion. HLS Secretary Tom Ridge's chief of staff was so taken by the system that "he left the office to get Ridge, so that he could see the demonstration himself." While grateful for the high-level attention on that day, this industry insider said it seemed almost as though the existence of NOAA Weather Radio were news to the Homeland Security people. This person added that a lack of awareness of NOAA Weather Radio is a very old problem within government ranks and among the general population. "If you ask 10 people...even those in state and federal government...to tell you what they know about weather radio, you are apt to get a blank stare and silence. At best you'll get something like 'it tells you about the weather in your area,' and a few might even know that 'it warns you in the event of bad weather.' It's like it's a secret system for most people. That's the real story...and not just within Homeland Security. Only the Weather Service and some emergency managers are aware

of Weather Radio's true utility." Wernly said the Weather Service believes that only about five percent of the U.S. population possesses NOAA Weather Radio receivers.²⁵⁹

Advertising could help, but the National Weather Service commands neither the funds nor the authority to make such an effort. Krudwig said the agency's lack of effective, large-scale promotional outreaches traces to bureaucratic regulation. "Unlike some federal agencies, the National Weather Service, along with most agencies, is prohibited from advertising without OMB [Office of Management and Budget] approval."²⁶⁰ Krudwig added, "Over the last 20 years of my career, OMB, through the Dept. of Commerce and NOAA, let it be known to the National Weather Service that any such request [for studies or surveys of awareness/usage of NOAA Weather Radio] would be denied, so Weather Service management just never tried. OMB's logic was that collection of such information might be used to further some legislation not supported by 'the administration.'"²⁶¹

Incredibly, after one summer of media attention given to child kidnappings, it now seems likely that more Americans know about AMBER Alerts than know about NOAA Weather Radio, a life-saving service that has existed for more than 30 years.

²⁵⁹ Email to the author. 4 November 2002.

²⁶⁰ Email to the author. 5 November 2002.

²⁶¹ Ibid.