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Breaking News

Senate Commerce approves creation of emergency alert system

By Jeffrey Silva

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WASHINGTON-The Senate Commerce Committee unanimously approved legislation to create a national emergency alert system designed to take advantage of wireless, Internet and other advanced technologies.

"I'm pleased that my colleagues understand the urgency of developing a comprehensive and modern alert system," said Sen. Jim DeMint (R-S.C.), chairman of the Senate Commerce subcommittee on disaster, prediction and prevention. "Without a way to properly alert those in danger, even the most accurate disaster prediction is useless. Today, we can use modern technology to reach Americans with critical safety information. With this bill, a mother picking up her kids from school would be able to have the latest alert for her community sent straight to her cell phone."

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Sens. DeMint and Ben Nelson (D-Neb.) introduced the Warning, Alert and Response Network Act last month.

The bill's \$250 million authorized cost for research, development and deployment would be paid for with proceeds from the auction of TV spectrum as part of the broadcasting industry's transition from analog to digital technology. The Commerce Committee also approved a bill requiring TV broadcasters to return 700 MHz frequencies by April 2009.

The \$250 million, to be controlled by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, would be spread among a national emergency warning system, grants for emergency alert pilot projects and a tsunami detection and warning system.

"The WARN Act will provide an effective and consistent method to warn Americans when their life is at risk. While the warnings in advance of Katrina were very widely disseminated, we learned that the threat to life continues after the storm passes. This bill provides the tools to alert communities about the provision of ice, water and other life-sustaining resources. I'm very appreciative of Commerce Committee Chairman Ted Stevens' (R-Alaska) leadership to make this critical need a top priority," said DeMint.

Much like the existing national warning system, largely unchanged since the Cold War a half century ago and currently limited to television, radio and cable TV operators, participation by wireless carriers would be voluntary. Mobile-phone operators choosing not to be part of the national alert system would have to disclose that fact at wireless retail stores. It is unclear whether cellular subscribers would be notified that their carrier has chosen not to transmit emergency messages.

A newly created national alert system administrator would be required to report in his/her first annual report to Congress when federal, state and local officials will be able to utilize the revamped warning network.

The bill requires the Federal Communications Commission to complete its emergency alert reform rulemaking within one year after enactment of the De-Mint-Nelson legislation.

The International Association of Fire Chiefs has endorsed the WARN Act. "This legislation would create a nationwide communications system to make first responders and the public better informed and prepared for all hazards, including terrorist attacks," said the IAFC.

The measure, now poised for action on the Senate floor, is co-sponsored by Sens. Stevens, Daniel Inouye (D-Hawaii), David Vitter (R-La.), Mary Landrieu (D-La.), Trent Lott (R-Miss.) and Olympia Snowe (R-Maine).

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