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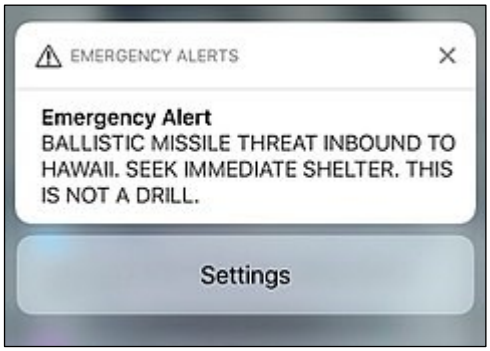
Emergency Alerting—False Alarm in Hawaii

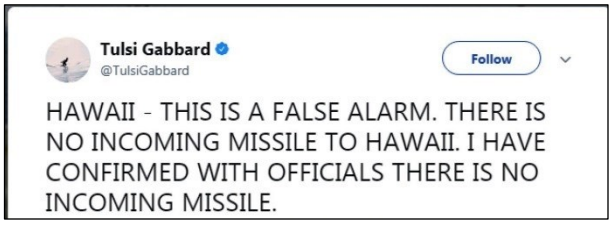
Background

On Saturday, January 13, 2018, at 8:07 a.m., an emergency alert was issued by Hawaii's Emergency Management Agency (HI-EMA) warning residents and visitors in Hawaii of an incoming ballistic missile. The message was sent by HI-EMA through the state's emergency alert system which distributed it to radio and television stations and to thousands of cell phone users in Hawaii. Widespread fear and panic was reported.



Within minutes, HI-EMA officials received the alert on their own cell phones and realized the message was sent in error. HI-EMA reported that a team member issued an actual alert instead of a test alert during a required test of the system at a shift change. HI-EMA then had difficulty issuing a correction/retraction message.

When they received the alert, the Hawaii National Guard reportedly contacted U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM) which confirmed there had been no missile launch. Representative Tulsi Gabbard contacted the Hawaii National Guard, confirmed there was no threat, and released a "FALSE ALARM" message on Twitter at 8:19 a.m.



HI-EMA posted a "FALSE ALARM" message on Facebook and Twitter at 8:20 a.m., but the official correction from HI-EMA through the state's emergency alerting system was not released until 8:45 a.m.—38 minutes after the initial alert.

Residents and elected officials criticized the length of time HI-EMA took to issue the correction.

Timeline

HI-EMA shared a timeline of events at a press conference held on January 13, 2018:

8:07 a.m.—The initial alert was sent.

8:10—HI-EMA officials received the alert on their own cell phones and started the cancellation process.

8:13—Hawaii's State Warning Point (the state's central communication center) initiated the process to stop transmitting the message.

8:20—HI-EMA posted the cancellation message to Facebook and Twitter.

8:24—Governor Ige retweeted the cancellation message.

8:30—Governor Ige posted the cancellation on Facebook.

8:45—HI-EMA issued a second alert over the emergency alert system, announcing the false alarm.

The Nation's Alerting System

In 2006, President George W. Bush issued Executive Order (E.O.) 13407 establishing a policy for national alerts and warnings. The E.O. provides the President with a means to communicate with citizens during emergencies, and recognizes the role of state, local, tribal, and territorial entities in emergency response.

The E.O. requires the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to lead the effort, in coordination with federal, state, local, tribal, territorial, and private sector partners – to integrate and modernize the nation's public alert and warning systems. These systems include:

- Emergency Alert System (EAS);
- National Warning System (NAWAS);
- Wireless Emergency Alerts (WEA); and
- NOAA Weather Radio All Hazards.

The network is designed to integrate the nation's warning systems into one system, called the Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS). IPAWS is managed and funded by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), a component of DHS. IPAWS allows alerts to be originated by federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial officials, and then sent through the IPAWS system which disseminates the message to the public using multiple alerting systems (e.g., EAS sends the alert to television and radio, WEA sends the alert to cell phones).

The benefit of IPAWS is that it allows authorized state and local officials to send one message to many channels at the same time, reducing the time needed to send messages, reducing the possibility of errors in message content and delivery, and ensuring timely delivery to citizens who may rely on different devices to receive emergency alerts.

As shown in this incident, officials may leverage multiple means of communication (e.g., social media) to send messages to citizens. This is not part of the national alerting system. The resulting benefits are that these messages are fast and easy to send; the risks are that they may not be accurate or coordinated with emergency management staff.

FCC Role

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) plays an important role in emergency alerts. In conjunction with FEMA and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) National Weather Service (NWS), the FCC implements the national Emergency Alert System (EAS). The EAS is a national public warning system that requires broadcasters (e.g., television, cable, satellite) to provide communications capabilities to (1) the President to address the American public during a national emergency, and (2) state and local governments to provide important emergency information to specific areas.

The FCC's role includes prescribing rules that establish technical standards for the EAS, procedures for broadcasters to follow, and testing protocols.

Further, the FCC is responsible for implementing the provisions in the Warning, Alert, and Response Network (WARN) Act (P.L. 109-347), which allowed commercial mobile service (CMS) providers to transmit the alerts to cell phones, if they chose. In 2016, the FCC adopted rules to improve Wireless Emergency Alerts (WEA), including making alert messages longer (more characters), supporting URL links to provide additional information to citizens, and supporting Spanish-language alerts.

Alerting Authorities

A federal, state, territorial, tribal, or local agency that has been granted authority by its government to alert the public in emergency situations can sign up for IPAWS. That agency is known as an "Alerting Authority."

IPAWS is accessed through special software that must meet IPAWS system requirements. Alerting Authorities can select software from a list of private sector developers who have successfully tested that software in an IPAWS Open Platform for Emergency Network (IPAWS-OPEN) test environment *or* they can select their own software that must then be tested in the IPAWS-OPEN test environment.

While access to IPAWS is free, and there is no cost to sending messages, Alerting Authorities must purchase the IPAWS-compatible software to access the system.

Incident in Hawaii—After Alert Was Sent

Immediately after the alert was sent, HI-EMA officials spent time researching how to retract the message. HI-EMA officials asked FEMA for clarification about whether they could use IPAWS to rescind an alert. FEMA stated that HI-EMA did not need approval to retract the alert, that it had authority to cancel or retract any time.

In a press conference several hours later, HI-EMA confirmed that the release of the "FALSE ALARM" was delayed while they consulted FEMA on the retraction policy and crafted the cancellation message. HI-EMA also confirmed that their alerting software allows for single-activation and verification of alerts. HI-EMA has since changed that protocol to require dual verification.

Some congressional policymakers have called for hearings on the incident, citing a need to review federal-state-local communications and response protocols during national security incidents, and requesting preparedness assistance. The state legislature is also conducting hearings.

Issues for Congress

Congressional hearings on the incident are planned. Issues for consideration may include:

- How are states prepared for disasters? Congress may hold hearings on the incident to learn about the issues Hawaii faced (e.g., communications, transportation, public health and safety); what FEMA has done and is doing to help states prepare for disaster; how well states feel they are prepared for disasters; and what FEMA can do to strengthen preparedness in all states.

- Are improvements to the national alert system needed? Congress may wish to request that FEMA/IPAWS review the software endorsed for use with IPAWS to ensure any features that could contribute to false alerts are corrected; review training modules to ensure cancellation procedures are included; provide additional training to states on cancellation protocols; and share lessons learned from Hawaii with other IPAWS users.

- How may policymakers improve alert systems? The system successfully delivered the alert, but provided limited information about what to do in response. There may be a need for the FCC, FEMA/IPAWS, and state emergency managers to coordinate to improve alerts and the delivery of follow-on instructions. The FCC is investigating the incident in Hawaii. Congress may wish to ask the FCC to share its findings, to determine how Congress may assist in improving alerts.

- How may policymakers improve coordination during response? Congress may review the findings from any after-action reports or investigations of this incident to address any issues with communications, coordination, and response among federal, state, and local officials.

Jill C. Gallagher, jgallagher@crs.loc.gov, 7-1024

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