

**Before the
FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
Washington, D.C.**

In the Matter of)
)
Public Safety and Homeland Security Bureau Seeks) PS Docket No. 18-339
Comments on Hurricane Michael Preparation and)
Response)

**COMMENTS OF THE
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF BROADCASTERS**

I. Introduction and Summary

The National Association of Broadcasters (NAB)¹ submits the following response to the above-captioned Public Notice, in which the Public Safety and Homeland Security Bureau requests comment on communications providers' preparation and response regarding Hurricane Michael.² Below, NAB describes the critical, often life-saving services that broadcasters provided before and during that storm, and their fundraising support after the hurricane to help the affected communities recover.

Radio and television stations are Americans' first choice for obtaining timely, trustworthy information during emergencies such as Hurricane Michael. Unlike other communications providers, local broadcasters are woven into the fabric of their local communities, and therefore are committed to keeping their neighbors informed and safe during emergencies. Stations in the storm path leveraged their investments in weather systems and experienced staff to provide residents with advance warning of the storm, as well as detailed on-going information on the path and duration of the hurricane. They also

¹ The National Association of Broadcasters is a nonprofit trade association that advocates on behalf of local radio and television stations and broadcast networks before Congress, the Federal Communications Commission and other federal agencies, and the courts.

² *Public Safety and Homeland Security Bureau Seeks Comment on Hurricane Michael Preparation and Response*, PS Docket No. 18-339, DA 18-1176 (Nov. 16, 2018) (Notice).

informed audiences about the availability of supplies and location of shelters. To help ensure continuous coverage, stations triggered arrangements to share emergency news with other stations, even competitors, and complemented their on-air coverage with information on their websites and social media.

The ability to provide these important services does not happen in a vacuum. Broadcasters, especially in hurricane-prone areas like those hit by Hurricane Michael, plan and practice throughout the year to make sure they are well-prepared for weather and other emergencies. For example, stations routinely review their emergency plans for operations and staff, and conduct exercises under various scenarios. They also install back-up generators, arrange for fuel reserves in case of an extended power outage, and maintain alternative transmission systems. In addition, broadcasters forge relationships with local public safety and emergency managers to facilitate communication when disaster strikes.

These preparations, combined with the reliable, decentralized nature of the broadcast infrastructure allowed stations to serve their communities during Hurricane Michael even when cell phone and wireless networks became unreliable. Indeed, a week after the storm landed, Chairman Pai prodded wireless carriers in Florida to accelerate the restoration of service and waive customer bills for the month of October.³ Compare this to Chairman Pai's description of broadcasters' performance during the storm: "Another familiar aspect is local radio and TV broadcasters were the unsung heroes in their first informer roles and in the aftermath."⁴

³ [Statement of Chairman Pai on Hurricane Michael Restoration Efforts](#) (Oct. 16, 2018).

⁴ [Pai: Broadcasters' "Unsung Heroes" During Hurricane Michael](#), InsideRadio.com (Oct. 24, 2018).

Local broadcasters' efforts during Hurricane Michael were also emblematic of why Congress recently codified broadcasters' status as "First Informers" in the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2018.⁵ As a result, broadcasters are now designated as an "essential service provider" in the Stafford Act,⁶ which entitles them to access federal disaster sites to restore service. Broadcasters appreciate this overdue recognition and will continue to advocate for similar state-based rules that facilitate access during emergencies.

II. Planning and Preparation Allowed Broadcasters to Help Keep their Communities Informed and Safe During Hurricane Michael

With sustained winds of 155 mph, Hurricane Michael was the fourth-strongest hurricane to hit the United States, the strongest by far to impact the Panhandle and the most powerful storm to hit Georgia since 1898.⁷ As it moved up the East Coast, the storm caused substantial damage to parts of the Carolinas and Georgia, including some areas still recovering from the impact of Hurricane Florence only a month earlier.⁸ The Notice recounts the disruption of communications services, as captured in the helpful status reports issued by the Commission in the days and weeks following the storm's landfall.⁹ These reports reflected data in the Commission's Disaster Information Reporting System (DIRS),¹⁰ and indicated that more than a hundred thousand subscribers lost cable service for a period of time, and that numerous wireless cell sites reported service outages for weeks after the

⁵ Pub.L. 115-141, §302, 132 Stat. 348 (2018).

⁶ Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act, PL 100-707, 42 U.S.C. § 5189e(a).

⁷ Phil Klotzbach, [Michael Made History as One of the Top Four Strongest Hurricanes to Strike the United States](#), Washington Post (Oct. 11, 2018).

⁸ Valeria Bauerlein, [Michael Adds Insult to Injury for Florence-Hit North Carolina](#), The Wall Street Journal (Oct. 12, 2018).

⁹ See, e.g., FCC, [Communications Status Report for Areas Impacted by Hurricane Michael, October 26, 2018](#).

¹⁰ See <https://www.fcc.gov/general/disaster-information-reporting-system-dirs-0>.

storm. Broadcasters were not immune to the storm's impact. On October 12, 2018, two days after the hurricane hit, four television stations, 27 FM and 5 AM radio stations reported being out of service.¹¹ On October 17, one television station, 13 FM and 2 AM stations were still off the air,¹² and by October 26, one television station, seven FM and 2 AM stations remained inoperable.¹³

These figures would have been much worse if broadcasters did not plan and prepare for disaster all year round,¹⁴ which allowed them to trigger emergency plans that address everything from fuel reserves to news-sharing arrangements with other stations. For example, Cumulus-owned stations in the Pensacola area had a written plan in place that staff reviewed to parse out responsibilities and instructions before the storm hit.¹⁵ iHeart Media's stations in the area also used the time before landfall wisely, pre-positioning equipment and personnel in areas at risk, and "making sure each market and station is fully prepared from an engineering and programming angle."¹⁶ Community Broadcasters topped off generators at its transmitters and made arrangements for staff to shelter in place at its offices and studios.¹⁷

¹¹ FCC, [Communications Status Report for Areas Impacted by Hurricane Michael, October 12, 2018](#).

¹² FCC, [Communications Status Report for Areas Impacted by Hurricane Michael, October 17, 2018](#).

¹³ See *supra* note 9.

¹⁴ NAB organized a conference last year, entitled "Eye of the Storm: Broadcasters' Role in Emergencies," which discussed broadcaster best practices for disaster preparation and recovery. Archived video of this conference can be found on [NAB's website](#). Two guides setting forth continuity best practices can be found at that [website](#): (1) Manny Centeno, Program Manager, DHS, FEMA, IPAWS, *Continuity of Broadcast Operations; Every Station Should Have a Plan*; and (2) NAB, *Ten Steps to Disaster Preparation and Recovery*.

¹⁵ [As First Informer, Radio Preps for Hurricane Michael](#), Inside Radio (Oct. 10, 2018).

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ *Id.*

Nevertheless, Hurricane Michael presented unique challenges. In Southwest Georgia, the staff of WALB-TV developed a carefully considered emergency plan that reflected lessons learned after two dangerous tornados and Hurricane Irma in 2017. However, the strength and duration of Hurricane Michael exceeded their expectations, knocking the station off the air. In fact, for a short period of time, all stations in WALB's market lost the ability to distribute content. Fortunately, broadcasters in Florida and Georgia displayed mettle and creativity to deliver the comprehensive news that Americans rely on during times of emergency. On Wednesday, October 10, Nextstar-owned WMBB-TV in Panama City was forced off the air because the heavy rainwater caved in part of the station's roof and a piece of a nearby building hit the station's generator. Staff had to implement a backup plan they never expected to use. On Thursday, October 11, one of WMBB's sister stations arrived with a satellite truck and the station's anchors and reporters resumed live broadcasting from the studio's parking lot, with a backdrop of a giant chunk of roof that flew off a nearby building.¹⁸

Radio stations in Panama City made similar heroic efforts, including iHeart Media's three stations in the market which stayed on the air using Wi-Fi and generator power to broadcast non-stop commercial-free information about the storm and relief resources for hours on end. One announcer even provided listeners with his personal cellphone number so he could relay messages from listeners looking for relatives and seeking food and water. Another announcer used the iHeart Radio van to transfer people to shelters, announcing on-air where he was located and imploring people to wave him down if they needed help.¹⁹

¹⁸ Brian Stelter and Dianne Gallagher, [Florida Newsrooms Pummeled by Hurricane Michael, but the Reporting Goes On](#), CNN.com (Oct. 12, 2018).

¹⁹ Alicia Adams, [Panama City Radio Stations Help with Hurricane Relief](#), Panama City News Herald (Oct. 13, 2018).

Broadcasters also implemented alternate arrangements to obtain and distribute emergency programming when their stations became inoperable, or to take advantage of another station's weather resources. For example, in Mobile, Alabama, WKSJ-FM increased the number of weather broadcasts and alerts it aired hourly, and relayed continuous updates from the meteorologist at its local TV partner, NBC 15.²⁰ Similarly, Gray Television-owned WJHG provided news to its sister station in Panama City, and Cumulus' WCOA shared news from its AccuWeather meteorologist with the company's five-station cluster in Pensacola.²¹ These kinds of plans enabled broadcasters to provide uninterrupted, detailed coverage of the storm, and in some cases, provide the only source for emergency information available to residents.

Broadcasters also used the Internet to keep their viewers and listeners informed during Hurricane Michael. As the most trustworthy source of emergency information, the websites of local radio and television stations are usually among the most popular sources of news during emergencies. For instance, WJHG aired its morning newscast on Facebook Live when its broadcast facilities were inoperable, and PMB Media in Columbus, Georgia used its social media accounts to share information and remind listeners that they can find the station on-air if their cell service goes out.²² Cumulus and Community also used Facebook, Twitter and their own websites to keep listeners informed.

Finally, broadcasters played a critical part in helping their communities recover after the storm. Radio and television stations served as the voice for charities and relief efforts,

²⁰ [*Radio Braces for The Worst; Hurricane Michael Now a Cat 3 Aiming at Tallahassee, Panama City with Life Threatening Wind, Rain*](#), AllAccess.com (Oct. 9, 2018).

²¹ [*In Wake of Hurricane Michael's Wrath, Radio Provides Helping Hand*](#), InsideRadio.com (Oct. 11, 2018).

²² *Id.*

raising awareness and funds in the wake of Hurricane Michael. Nexstar's WFLA-TV in Tampa raised more than \$120,000 in relief funds from 926 calls during a 12-hour telethon,²³ Hearst's WDSU in New Orleans partnered with the Second Harvest Food bank to raise more than \$45,000²⁴ and the Walt Disney Company donated \$1 million to help victims as well as matched employees' contributions to relief organizations.²⁵ These are only a few examples of broadcaster efforts to provide food, water, cleaning and other supplies for people impacted by Hurricane Michael.

Broadcasters stepped up during Hurricane Michel because it is their duty. As Cumulus' Programming Manager for Pensacola stated about radio:

Because we are skilled, ubiquitous, committee and free – and our listeners are our friends and neighbors — we recognize thousands will be leaning on us for vital information and we take that responsibility seriously. Even with an explosion of technologies, it's radio the public will turn to in times like these. After the power goes out, cable fails and the internet goes dark, we will be here doing what we do best.²⁶

III. Lessons Learned and Commission Initiatives that Could Improve Broadcasters' Response to Emergencies

NAB outreach to broadcasters affirms that the most important part of an emergency plan centers on the physical safety of a station's employees and families. Radio and TV station staff are local to their audiences and feel a deep sense of responsibility to deliver news during an emergency, sometimes even at their own peril. For these reasons, some station managers in Southwest Georgia plan to revise and expand their emergency plans to

²³ [WFLA Raises More Than \\$120K for Hurricane Michael Relief Efforts](#), WFLA.com (Oct. 15, 2018).

²⁴ [More Than \\$45,000 Raised for Hurricane Michael Victims with WDSU, Second Harvest Telethon](#), WDSU.com (Oct. 15, 2018).

²⁵ [Walt Disney Company Donates \\$1M to Help Hurricane Michael Victims](#), WFLA.com (Oct. 13, 2018).

²⁶ See *supra* note 14.

designate teams to work together when dangerous situations are anticipated. Such an approach also will help ensure that individuals are not stranded alone, especially at night or in remote areas. Other stations intend to exercise additional caution even during events that seem less dangerous. NAB plans to continue to educate broadcasters about best practices for keeping staff safe during emergencies, and would welcome the Commission's coordination in these efforts.

IV. Conclusion

NAB applauds the Commission for reviewing the performance of communications services providers during Hurricane Michael. Broadcasters played a vital role in helping to keep residents informed and safe during the storm, and we look forward to working with the Commission on further efforts in this area.

Respectfully submitted,

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