



Wireless Priority Service

Issue Background

Emergency situations, such as natural disasters, terrorist attacks, and major accidents, typically trigger increased congestion of telecommunications networks, impeding national security and emergency preparedness (NS/EP) functions by preventing network access for critical personnel. Consequently, the President's National Security Telecommunications Advisory Committee (NSTAC) investigated the technical, administrative, and regulatory issues associated with the deployment of a ubiquitous wireless priority service (WPS), which enhances basic wireless communications by allowing NS/EP calls priority access to available cellular channels. Supported by an NSTAC recommendation and its own research, the National Communications System (NCS) received authority to execute a WPS program on behalf of the Executive Office of the President. The WPS program is currently available to Federal, State, and local officials with key NS/EP functions including those with essential disaster response and recovery responsibilities. The program dramatically improves end-to-end call completion particularly when used in conjunction with the Government Emergency Telecommunications Service.

History of NSTAC Actions

In 1991, the NSTAC recommended that the Government designate an organization to be responsible for monitoring the effects of the emergence of the digital wireless networks on NS/EP communications. Subsequently, the Government selected the Office of the Manager, NCS (OMNCS), Wireless Services Program Office (WPSO), as the monitoring organization. The NSTAC then commissioned the Wireless Services Task Force (WSTF) to assist the WPSO in developing a plan of action for addressing wireless security issues and to provide industry's input to that process. Subsequently, the NSTAC submitted recommendations to the President suggesting that the Government pursue the establishment of a single, nationwide priority access capability for NS/EP users. In addition, the NSTAC worked with the OMNCS to encourage the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to apply its Second Report and Order to Priority Access Services, which succeeded in 2000. That FCC action authorized wireless carriers to voluntarily offer WPS and granted liability protections to carriers providing the service.

The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks generated a renewed interest in implementing a ubiquitous WPS among NS/EP personnel. Although the NCS first implemented a WPS-like capability at the 2002 Olympic Games in Salt Lake City, industry and Government recognized the need for a more comprehensive solution. As a result, the NSTAC examined obstacles to the ubiquitous rollout of WPS and submitted a letter to the President recommending that the Government address those barriers, including deficient Federal funding, technological limitations, and a lack of outreach to State and local levels regarding the role of WPS in homeland security.

Recent NSTAC Activities

The NCS began implementing an interim WPS in May 2002 in Washington, D.C., and New York, N.Y., and in January 2003, officially launched the program in several other major U.S. cities along the east coast. During Hurricane Katrina, the NCS enabled over 4,000 WPS phones. The NCS now offers the WPS program in most major markets on Global System for Mobile Communications (GSM) and Code Division Multiple Access (CDMA) platforms, and as of September 30, 2009, the total number of active phones was 98,942. The NSTAC, in concert with the NCS, continually examines the need for updates to priority services. In its February 2004, Satellite Task Force report, the NSTAC suggested that the NCS extend the WPS program to mobile satellite operators.