

# Wireless Emergency Alerts: Three Types of Warnings

The Commercial Mobile Alert System (CMAS) can be used to broadcast three types of emergency alerts:

- **PRESIDENTIAL ALERTS** — Issued by the U.S. President in the event of a nationwide emergency. Can't opt out of this alert.
- **IMMINENT THREAT ALERTS** — Typically issued by the National Weather Service; in the Wisconsin area these would include tornado, flash flooding, ice storm and blizzard warnings.
- **AMBER ALERTS** — Issued by law enforcement to share information about a child abduction.

**No president has yet to issue a presidential alert**, but should one become necessary, participating cell phone providers are required to broadcast it to all WEA-capable phones.

**Cell phone users** may choose to opt out of imminent threat and/or AMBER alerts, but the procedures vary by carrier. Some providers will allow customers to opt out of one or the other, while others only allow you to opt out of both. Contact your wireless provider for more information.

**Wisconsin Emergency Management** and the National Weather Service encourage all residents not to opt out of these potentially life-saving messages.

## Website Addresses

National Weather Service Main Site  
[www.weather.gov](http://www.weather.gov)



Weather-Ready Nation

<http://www.nws.noaa.gov/com/weatherreadynation/>  
Are you ready for dangerous weather?

FEMA Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS)

<http://www.fema.gov/emergency/ipaws/>  
Explains IPAWS, WEA, and much more.

CTIA Consumer Information

[http://www.ctia.org/consumer\\_info/safety/index.cfm/AID/12082](http://www.ctia.org/consumer_info/safety/index.cfm/AID/12082)

CTIA is a wireless association with info about WEA.

Wisconsin Emergency Management (WEM)

<http://emergencymanagement.wi.gov/>

WEM coordinates emergency management services to the state's 5.6 million citizens.

ReadyWisconsin

<http://readywisconsin.wi.gov/>

A Wisconsin Emergency Management preparedness initiative designed to educate and empower Wisconsinites to prepare for and respond to all kinds of emergencies.



## Integrated Public Alert and Warning System

### Wireless Emergency Alerts



For illustration only. Actual message appearance will vary.

**In weather emergencies**, warnings can save lives. But traditional warning methods such as television, radio and outdoor sirens don't always reach everyone.

**Beginning in June 2012**, officials will have a new way to send warnings directly to cell phones in affected areas — Wireless Emergency Alerts (WEAs). WEA functionality will help us become a Weather-Ready Nation!

**These short messages** may look like a text message, but unlike texts, which are sent directly to your phone number, these warnings will be broadcast to all phones within range of designated cell towers through the Commercial Mobile Alert System (CMAS).

The alerts will tell you the type of warning, the affected area, and the duration. You'll need to turn to other sources, such as television or your NOAA Weather Radio All Hazards, to get more detailed information about what is happening and what actions you should take.

## Key Things to Know:

- WEA messages may look like a text, or appear over your home screen, and are limited to 90-characters.
- The alert message will include a unique ringtone and vibration; both repeated twice.
- You will never be charged for WEA messages.
- Emergency alerts will not interrupt any calls or downloads in progress. If you're on the phone when the alert goes out, you'll get the message when you end your call.
- You need not have GPS or any other special features turned on to receive the alerts.
- The system does not identify your location or phone number — it simply sends the message to all devices in a given area.
- If you're on the road and enter an area with an active warning, you'll receive a WEA message as soon as you come within range of one of the affected cell towers.
- WEA is not a replacement for other warnings systems, but should be used as one part of a multiple-warning system which should include NOAA Weather Radio All Hazards, local commercial TV, etc.

## Is your phone ready for WEA?

If you have an older model phone, you may not receive the Wireless Emergency Alerts. Some, such as newer-model iPhone and Android phones, will soon receive software updates that add this feature.



Check with your service provider to find out if your phone is WEA-capable.

AT&T, Cricket, Sprint, T-Mobile and Verizon all have information about the new alert system on their websites. Search for WEA (Wireless Emergency Alerts) or CMAS (Commercial Mobile Alert System) to find your provider's list of WEA-capable phones.

## Cell tower geography may lead to over-warning

Because cell towers broadcast in a radius, or circle, their coverage areas don't line up neatly with county boundaries. This means you may receive warnings for an adjacent county if you're within a few miles of the border.

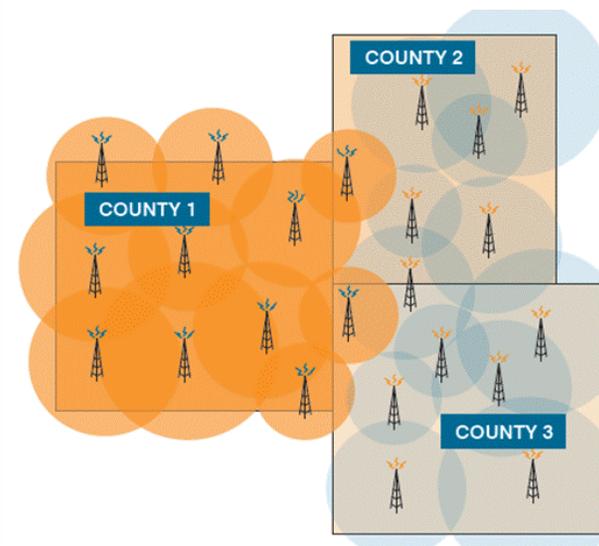
The alerts are delivered directly from cell tower to cell phone through a one-way broadcast. The Commercial Mobile Alert System does not track or locate individual cell phones or phone numbers — it simply broadcasts to all phones within range. Unfortunately, in some cases, this may result in over-warning.

For example, if a tornado warning is issued for a particular county, it will go to all towers that serve that county.

Towers in urban areas generally serve a radius of two to five miles, and in rural areas up to 10 miles, so the warning message may reach a little beyond the warning boundaries.

As the simplified illustration below shows, when a warning is issued for County 1, people in County 2 and County 3 who are within range of a tower that serves the warned county will also get the message.

In reality, there are hundreds of towers with



overlapping service areas throughout a typical metropolitan area.

**Source credit:** This brochure was produced by the National Weather Service offices that serve Wisconsin in conjunction with Wisconsin Emergency Management. Nearly all material in this brochure is from the Metropolitan Emergency Managers Committee of Greater Kansas City. (PrepareMetroKC.org)