US Senator Maria Cantwell

Senate Floor Speech on Proposed Public Broadcasting Cuts

July 16th, 2025

[VIDEO]

Sen. Cantwell: I so appreciate Senator Murray and Leader Schumer out here speaking on these important issues. But as a Committee who's thought a lot about storms lately, we're not just putting PBS at risk here, we're putting millions of Americans who depend on local media for life saving information [at risk]. And what's in this rescission request is really making sure that public broadcasters don't have that ability, at least in 20 states where they have emergency plans.

So, what happens is that NPR manages [the] Public Radio Satellite System. They receive emergency alerts. They tell us to get out of the way. PBS operates the Warning Alert and Response Network, which then transmits over 11,000 emergency alerts alone last year, a 30% increase from the previous year. So why are we talking about cutting off emergency alerts? That's [11,000] times these stations were warned to tell people that their lives were in danger.

Let me explain what PBS's warning system means for American families in plain English. When emergency managers, such as someone at FEMA or the National Weather Service or local officials hit send on a lifesaving alert, it normally travels through wireless carriers' infrastructure to reach cell towers. But what happens when [there are] cyberattacks or those infrastructures are crippled, when the fiber lines don't work or they're cut in a storm, when disaster like fire or flood or hurricane knocks them out? What happens to the communication infrastructure then?

Well, that's what PBS WARN does. It fills in. PBS stations also on the radio, through the airwaves, because they don't have to rely on physical infrastructure, they basically communicate to more than 340 PBS stations nationwide. These stations, running on backup generators, are built to broadcast through disasters. I mean, I think if anybody's got any history to them, they realize that there has been lots of lifesaving information over the airwaves.

So, local infrastructure, like TV receivers, local regional facilities, grab that alert signal from the PBS broadcast, no internet required, and they get the information out to us. This system and these critical alerts are the primary thing that we use in the nation when everything else goes dark. That means that every PBS transmitter becomes a backup lifetime line for emergency alerts, ensuring that warnings about tornadoes, fires, floods and evacuations reach your cell phone in seconds.

Just think about that. If you have this flood we had in Kerrville and you don't have a communication system, the PBS system is the one that sends the alerts, because they've gotten it through the airwaves.

This Administration, and my colleagues now, want to pull the plug on this. Just look at yesterday's alerts alone on flash flooding in North Carolina, in Central Texas, in Arizona, a statewide missing person alert in Kentucky, a tornado warning across Nebraska, South Dakota and Wisconsin, and dozens more.

Why would we want anybody to miss a disaster alert? It could even be about boiling water and making sure that you have the right water. These are all important communication systems, and they're important when cell phones and the internet don't work.

On November 30th, 2018, a magnitude 7.1 earthquake shook south central Alaska. In Anchorage, roads split apart, buildings crumbled, power lines snapped, cell towers went down within seconds, and people panicked as they tried to reach loved ones. The Internet failed, but Alaska Public Media never stopped, broadcasting. Operating on backup power, they immediately activated their emergency protocols.

As the aftershocks, including a 5.7 tremor, continued to rock the region. APM provided real time updates on road closures, school evacuations, and tsunami warnings. They broadcasted which bridges had been damaged, where emergency shelters had opened, most critically assured isolated communities that the help was on the way. For thousands of Alaskans, that familiar voice on radio was their only connection to vital information during the most terrifying memories that they have had.

In a letter to the editor of the Anchorage Daily News, one person wrote, “commercial radio may be helpful down south, but rural Alaska is different. Pick any rural Alaskan community with exposure to these dangers, and you will find probably that they don't have a commercial radio station. They probably do receive the NPR station.”

“In rural Alaska,” they continued, “there is no market driven solution to ensure emergency broadcasts are available in a disaster that recurs on 100 year scale time.”

So it's not just Alaska that has this problem. Consider what happened in Kentucky during the historic tornadoes in December of 2021, when the devastating EF4 tornado carved 160 mile path of destruction on one of the longest tornado tracks in our nation's history. WKMS Public Radio became the sole source of news for thousands of Kentuckians.

As the tornado ripped through Mayfield at 9:30, destroying the town's candle factory with 110 people stuck inside, commercial power failed across Western Kentucky. And those cell towers toppled, the internet connections vanished. And WKMS kept broadcasting on a backup power guiding search and rescue teams through darkness.

It is time that my colleagues understand that in the words of station managers, “In these kinds of moments, your emergency radio or your car radio is literally the only thing to have to get you any news or a lifeline.”

I ask my colleagues, please do not cut off emergency broadcast funding. How could you possibly think that's a wise idea in the events that we are facing in our nation?

I thank the president. I yield the floor.