

Expand Access to Emergency Information: Unlock FM

ISSUE SUMMARY

Virtually all smartphones are manufactured with hardware capable of receiving free FM radio signals, but not all phones have this feature activated, either by choice of the phone's manufacturer or the wireless carrier. However, Apple has not activated this feature on any of its iPhones, preventing their customers from saving battery life and data charges, while also blocking access to a critical lifeline during times of emergency.

History

In recent years, the major cellular service providers have all provided increased access to FM radio capability, which exists in virtually all smartphones. As of early 2017, most of the top-selling Android phones being sold in the U.S. have FM radio activated. However, Apple phones stand out, as not a single iPhone model supports reception of FM.

The consumer benefits to FM radio in phones are clear:

- Using built-in FM radio, as opposed to streaming, provides six times longer battery life.
- Listening to local radio rather than streaming does not incur data charges.
- Local radio is a dependable lifeline, available when other forms of communication fail.
- During emergencies, whether because of physical damage to the network or too much traffic, Craig Fugate, administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has stated, "Your cell phone becomes a brick" but local radio still works.

Virtually all smartphones are manufactured with hardware capable of receiving free FM radio signals, but not all phones have this feature activated, either by choice of the phone's manufacturer or the wireless carrier. However, Apple has not activated this feature on any of its iPhones, preventing their customers from saving battery life and data charges, while also blocking access to a critical lifeline during times of emergency.

To empower consumers and enhance public safety, Congress, FEMA, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and the wireless industry should consider ways to expand consumer access to FM radio in mobile devices. NAB does not support mandated FM radio in cellphones. However, we urge all wireless carriers to clearly communicate to consumers which models already have built-in broadcast radio, and agree to unlock FM in their phones.