

Senate Committee on Transportation and Homeland Security
Public Hearing – June 8, 2010
Amarillo, TX

Good morning. My name is Vernon Cook and I am the County Judge for Roberts County. I'm going to limit my comments today to Interim Charge 3 and in particular, communications interoperability. I want to prequalify my remarks by stating for the record that I'm not an expert in communications technology, I am merely an emergency management practitioner who like any other emergency management official, relies heavily on a radio to maintain communications and situational awareness during a public safety event.

I'm here today testifying in two capacities. I'm the current year president of the Texas Association of Counties and I believe my thoughts expressed here today represent the thoughts of many of my peers across the State. In a more intimate capacity, I'm also speaking to you from my unique perspective as the County Judge and Emergency Management Coordinator for Roberts County. It's because I serve in this dual capacity back at home that I feel I'm qualified to speak for my fellow county judges in Texas. I'm well familiar with the role the County Judge plays in disaster response and I also know what it takes to be an effective Emergency Management Coordinator. In both instances, I believe the most essential capability our responders must possess, whether they're coordinating efforts from the EOC or directing a response on the front lines, is the ability to communicate with each other and with any other agency involved in the response.

I came to appreciate the value of interoperable communications during the Panhandle wildfire disaster in March 2006; not because we had it but because we lacked it. During that event, responder groups from around the Panhandle, the State and the country were in my County fighting fires from various positions in what was supposed to be a unified response. However, due to our inability to communicate effectively, too often our efforts were disjointed and uncoordinated and as a result the fire spread further than it should have and lives and property were placed at unnecessary risk. (If we have time at the end of this presentation, I'll tell you my story of the flaming, flying cow chips.)

Interoperable communications is not only essential in times of disaster, interoperability is critical to all aspects of public safety communications.

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I believe this group recognized that need in its Report to the 80th Legislature. One of the recommendations made in that document reads as follows:

Radio Interoperability. The Committee believes permanent funding for maintenance of radio interoperability among the COGs is a matter worthy of the Legislature's consideration.

Among my other duties, I also serve on the Panhandle Regional Planning Commission's Regional Emergency Management Advisory Committee or PREMAC. Since FY2004, the PREMAC has invested over \$5,000,000 or nearly 40% of the regional homeland security funding the Panhandle has received since that year in rebuilding the infrastructure that supports interoperable public safety communications in this region; a program we've titled PANCOM. We estimate that we'll need approximately \$1,000,000 in additional funding to complete our basic PANCOM build-out. We've had to defer other important regional preparedness needs to keep our focus on PANCOM. However, the PREMAC believes, like many officials in the region, that our ability to communicate with each other is the most critical preparedness asset we can have. So, as long as the homeland security funding comes to the region, the PREMAC will continue to press on with the PANCOM project.

Once completed, PANCOM will meet all the requirements of the federal P25 standards and will be compliant with the guidance of the State Communications Interoperability Plan (SCIP). From a technology standpoint, PANCOM will be light-years ahead of the 40-year old system it is replacing. Tubes and diodes are being replaced with microwave links and computers using Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) on a secure private network, providing a robust and highly redundant system of radio repeaters that can be patched together to enhance interoperability. This modern network also enables centralized monitoring and trouble-shooting. The PREMAC is taking what was once a hodgepodge of different communications capabilities and re-building those into a true region-wide interoperable communications system for the 21st Century; a system that will adequately serve the Panhandle's public safety communications needs for many years to come. I understand the same is being done in planning regions across the state.

Testimony of:

Judge Vernon Cook
Roberts County Judge & 2010 TAC President

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However, even as we continue the build-out of PANCOM; we've begun to encounter the costs of keeping the system maintained. The system will utilize 42 radio tower sites around the region; many of those sites are privately owned. This past year alone, we had to use \$100,000 of our regional homeland allocation to renew leases on a number of those sites. The parts and pieces that make up the system, although much more advanced than the equipment they're replacing, are more complicated and take more attention to network management, maintenance, and periodic upgrades—functions for which we have no dedicated funding stream. Even as we look forward to completing PANCOM, we can anticipate that shortly thereafter we'll have to begin replacing some of the elements installed in the earliest phase of the project's implementation. That will continue to be the case every year from now on.

The State has invested heavily in creating and sustaining Texas' 9-1-1 capabilities; a system that works to save the lives of Texans each and every day. But, please keep in mind that 9-1-1 represents only half of the response equation. If the 9-1-1 call taker can't effectively communicate with the responders being dispatched to a call then the value of the 9-1-1 system is greatly diminished. Both ends of the communications stream, the call in-take and the call dispatch, have to flow equally effectively in order for the system to work as intended.

During the 81st Legislative Session, Representative Chisum co-authored a bill, HB 2507, which was to establish an interoperable statewide emergency radio infrastructure and a emergency radio infrastructure account. The bill was designed in part to address the maintenance needs of regional systems like the one we're developing in the Panhandle. HB 2507 had strong support from groups across the State including the Texas Sheriff's Association. Our own PRPC Board of Directors passed a resolution in support of the bill. I believe the bill passed 148-0 in the House but then came up short in the Senate Finance Committee.

I understand that efforts are underway to resurrect the bill for the coming session under the moniker of Operation Texas Talks.

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If you've not seen it before, I'm attaching some information on Operation Texas Talks to my written testimony and I would encourage you all to read about it when you get a moment.

The key take-away that I want to leave you with today is an encouragement for Texas to follow-up on the recommendations that you made in your report to the 80th Legislature. All across the state, tens of millions of dollars are being invested in modernizing and integrating radio systems into interoperable systems. Heretofore, much of that work has been funded through federal programs. However, we need to prepare for the day when federal funding for these types of projects no longer exists. As has been done with 9-1-1 system, Texas needs to insure that the investments made in interoperable communications over the past 5 years survive to continue serving the on-going public safety needs of Texans. I would urge this Committee to champion that cause as we move toward the 82nd Legislative Session. Whether Operation Texas Talks is the basis for any new legislation or not, Texas needs to create 9-1-1 – like, permanent funding stream for the maintenance of regional interoperable public safety communications' systems. Otherwise, all the investments we've made as a State to improve interoperable communications over the past several years are likely to deteriorate and diminish over time.

In closing, as I look through the various activities wrapped under Interim Charge 3, I believe the effective conduct of those actions begins with one thing – communications interoperability. As I learned first-hand in March 2006, if we can't talk to each other, we can't work together effectively.

I thank you for your time and for the work you're doing for the State of Texas.



*"When They Can't Talk Lives Are Lost"
"The inability of our public safety officials to readily communicate with one another threatens the public's safety and often results in unnecessary loss of lives and property"¹*

Objective: Provide consistent funding for ongoing development, maintenance, and capital replacement of interoperable communications systems for emergency first responders statewide, allowing them to talk within and across agencies and jurisdictions on demand, in real time, and when authorized.

More than 5,300 fire, police and emergency medical service agencies respond daily to emergency and life-threatening incidents throughout Texas. They often must rely on aging and/or proprietary communication systems that limit their ability to share vital information with other agencies on-scene. In many cases, public safety responders can't even talk to their own people on the radio due to inadequate coverage within their areas of responsibility.

"Operable" voice radio communications ensure that first responders have access to radio communications systems that provide adequate coverage and features to meet their everyday communication requirements while performing the most basic elements of their jobs.

"Interoperable" voice radio communications allow public safety and service agencies (police, fire, EMS, not-for-profit non-governmental entities, public works, transportation, hospitals, etc.) to communicate across agencies and jurisdictions on demand, in real time, and when authorized. It means, in any multi-agency, multi-discipline emergency response, all are able to talk to one another by radio.

Texas Public Safety Radio Communications Problems

- Inadequate or no radio communications equipment for some agencies, thus no "operability"
- Inadequate or no radio coverage in some areas, thus no "operability"
- Aged and decaying radio towers and antenna systems
- Aged and outmoded radio systems, thus limited "operability"
- Dissimilar radio systems, thus limited "interoperability" with others
- Upcoming regulatory changes may cause some agencies with older technology systems to lose communications capabilities

Texas Public Safety Agencies need \$84-million per year in state funds, plus federal and local funds, over the next five years to achieve basic statewide interoperable communications to meet the State Communications Interoperability Plan (SCIP) stated goal of interoperability in 2015

Strategy: Create partnerships among public safety agencies throughout Texas to build and maintain a cost-effective interoperable communications network using shared resources. *Operation Texas Talks* proposes to use federal, state, and local funding to provide interoperable communications to state and local public safety agencies and emergency responders. (For more information, go to <http://txrc.region49.org>.)

Consequences of Doing Nothing:

- Citizens and property are at risk because emergency responders may be unable to communicate by radio to coordinate the most efficient and effective delivery of emergency services
- Safety of our emergency responders is at risk with inadequate voice communications capabilities
- Loss of grant funding due to inability of many jurisdictions to meet cash-match requirements without State assistance

¹ "When They Can't Talk Lives Are Lost, What Public Officials Need to Know about Interoperability", National Association of Counties (NACO) http://www.naco.org/Template.cfm?Section=New_Technical_Assistance&template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=28702

Fact Sheet: OPERATION TEXAS TALKS

When critical incidents and disasters strike, effective response requires rapid coordination among all emergency first responders. Without “operable” and “interoperable” communications, *a coordinated and effective emergency response is simply not possible.*

Citizens look to their elected and appointed officials to ensure that public safety agencies can respond effectively in a crisis. To provide effective operable and interoperable communications for emergency first responders across Texas, ***\$84-million per year in State funding will be required over the next five years to build and maintain a statewide “system of systems,” which is a network of local and regional public safety communication systems connected together to provide seamless “interoperability.”***

Frequently Asked Question: Why \$84-million per year in state funding?

- Many current radio systems and towers are 25-30 years old and can no longer be maintained. They must be replaced. Spending \$84-million per year for five years (\$420-million, plus \$393-million in anticipated federal grant funds) will provide a basic statewide “interoperable wireless communications” infrastructure (state and local agencies will have to fund the majority of their own mobile and portable radios).
- Lack of basic interoperability has forced first responders use runners to carry messages from one unit to another when responding to emergencies.
- Traffic accidents, missing children, fires, high speed chases, rescues, and chemical spills occur with frightening regularity and do not respect jurisdictional boundaries. When they occur in your community, will your agency responders be able to talk to one another?
- The ability, or the inability of first responders to effectively communicate in a timely manner can mean the difference between life and death.
- Citizens expect that their calls to 9-1-1 for help will bring emergency responders who can effectively work together to deal with their issues. Unfortunately, fire, police, and EMS often cannot talk to each other over the radio because their systems are not interoperable. Responding quickly and effectively to a 9-1-1 call is contingent upon the ability of responders being able to effectively communicate with each other by radio.
- Currently, many first responders often must juggle multiple radio units (if they have access to multiple radios) to talk across agencies and disciplines, because the police department's radio system is different from the sheriff's system, which is different from the fire department's system. This can slow response times and increase operational and maintenance costs for all.
- Systems that share infrastructure (towers, dispatch centers, etc.) and cover large areas are **THE MOST EFFECTIVE USE OF TAXPAYER DOLLARS**. Partnering and sharing radio system infrastructure **LOWERS THE COST FOR PROVIDING INTEROPERABILITY** between agencies.
- There is limited funding to replace or update communications equipment, which mandates that governments collaborate.

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- Funding requirements for building and maintaining a statewide "system of systems" requires a coordinated effort and assistance from the State and Federal Governments.
- To be efficient and effective, the public safety community must be provided reliable communications equipment that will allow them to communicate with each other. This issue is too important to ignore and too big for any of us to solve individually. We must work together to ensure our public safety responders are adequately equipped to do their jobs. Texas will reap the benefits.