

Committee on Energy and Commerce
Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Full Committee Ranking Member Frank Pallone, Jr.

Communications and Technology Subcommittee

Hearing on “Listen Here: Why Americans Value AM Radio”

June 6, 2023

AM Radio stations play a critical role in our nation’s communications network and that’s why I was so concerned when some automakers recently announced that they were planning to phase out AM radio from their electric vehicle models.

I know firsthand how important AM radio can be during an emergency. In October 2012, after pummeling the Caribbean, Superstorm Sandy slammed the New Jersey coast with 80 mile-per-hour sustained winds and rain. There was extensive flooding and damage along the coasts of New Jersey and New York, including many of the beach and Bayshore towns in my district. States as far west as Kentucky suffered power outages that lasted for days. Communications infrastructure was heavily damaged, including 25 percent of cellular towers across ten states.

Some of my constituents went days without power and telephone and internet connections, largely isolated and seeking whatever information they could get. A number of them relied on broadcast AM radio stations to get up-to-the-minute information like where to get water, gas, and groceries. And in some cases, their best source for AM radio was their vehicle.

So that’s why I was so troubled to learn that EV manufacturers had made the unliteral decision to remove AM radio from their cars, and as I understand it, without notice to consumers, who have for the most part gotten used to having AM radio as part of a standard auto package.

I am proud of this Committee’s bipartisan work to encourage and promote more resilient communications networks, including my SANDY Act. And with the growing prevalence and reliability of wireless alerting systems, some people may wonder why we are concerned about the loss of AM tuners in cars, particularly given newer technology like satellites and IP networks.

The answer is that AM has proven its value in emergency situations, which is particularly important now as the worsening climate crisis unleashes new and more powerful storms across the country. Despite our continued efforts to make cellular towers and equipment more resilient, they are still vulnerable during extreme weather events.

Last week when a typhoon hit Guam, preliminary press reports suggested that many cellular towers and FM stations throughout the island were knocked out. AM stations stayed on the air.

AM radio broadcast stations are the backbone of the Emergency Alert System infrastructure, which delivers critical safety alerts during public emergencies. During cellular network outages, AM broadcast frequencies are still able to travel 100 miles or more to deliver public safety communications.

It's no wonder that seven former Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) administrators wrote to Transportation Secretary Buttigieg earlier this year urging the federal government to seek assurances from auto manufacturers to preserve AM radio access in vehicles for public safety.

And we cannot be satisfied by reliance on emergency content delivered through internet or satellite services that require a subscription or data plan. These services put consumers on the hook for additional monthly or annual costs. The government makes our country's electromagnetic airwaves available at no charge to broadcasters, who then carry these important alerts and messages to the public at no cost. We must ensure this vital information is free to consumers.

Thankfully, AM content is not just emergency and disaster information. For most of the time, broadcast programming content runs the gamut. In fact, according to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), AM stations are more likely than FM stations or other kinds of media outlets to be owned by women and Black or Hispanic Americans. As we look to increase media diversity, we should keep in mind that AM radio is an important part of our nation's multicultural media programming.

These are the main reasons that we simply cannot allow EV manufacturers now or in the future to remove AM radio from their EV models.

So, I want to thank Chairs Rodgers and Latta, and Ranking Member Matsui, for joining me in holding this important bipartisan hearing. I'd also like to introduce Lieutenant Colonel Chris DeMaise who is the Commanding Officer of the Emergency Management Section of the New Jersey Office of Emergency Management. Over the years, he has also led emergency responses to hurricanes and other disasters throughout the country. We appreciate you joining us today to share your expertise and perspective on the importance of AM Radio to emergency management and thank you for all that you do for New Jersey.