

# It's so easy a caveman could understand it!

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I'm not sure what cave the politicians and managers of some of this nation's public safety radio systems have just crawled out of, but let me make this as plain as I can – "Please spend your taxpayers money on communications wisely: purchase radio systems that are P25 compatible."

Shortly after Hurricane Katrina hit the Louisiana/Mississippi Gulf Coast, I wrote an editorial in *Monitoring Times* magazine critical of public safety radio system interoperability in that part of the Gulf Coast region. New Orleans, Slidell, and Biloxi/Gulfport/Harrison County were all using the M/A-COM ProVoice EDACS trunk systems, and it was only a matter of time before this choice was going to cause major problems in a crisis. And that is exactly what happened during Hurricane Katrina.

First, let me make this perfectly clear. I am not against M/A-COM or their public safety trunk systems *per se*. But I am deeply concerned about agencies using non-standard digital protocols such as Open Sky and ProVoice. If a public safety agency wants to use an M/A-COM trunk system or radio, that's fine. Just don't use a proprietary digital protocol on that system.

The M/A-COM Provoice digital standard that the Gulf Coast agencies were using was not compatible with the APCO (Association of Public-safety Communications Officials) Project 25 standard which the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), all of the Department of Defense, most U.S. federal government agencies, the State of Louisiana, and other parish public safety agencies in the Katrina disaster area were using. When the EDACS ProVoice trunk system failed in New Orleans, it caused major problems for the first responders in that city. They had to resort to 800 MHz mutual aid simplex channels and 800 MHz car-to-car relays of emergency radio traffic in order to respond to calls during the crisis.

New Orleans, Slidell, and the various public safety agencies in Harrison County, Mississippi, were all members of my P25 Hall of Shame List (shame on them for using a system which is NOT interoperable). Those editorials are all on our *Monitoring Times* home page at [www.monitoringtimes.com](http://www.monitoringtimes.com).

## ❖ Lessons Learned - and one Dunce

Incorporating lessons learned in the cha-

otic aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks and Hurricane Katrina, law enforcement agencies in Orleans, Jefferson, St. Bernard and Plaquemines parishes can now communicate with each other using one radio system. On February 5, 2007, the parishes mentioned above brought online a shared 700-megahertz P25 digital radio system paid for with federal disaster funds and grant money from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

You can read the complete *Times Picayune* story on this event online at:

[www.nola.com/news/t-p/metro/index.ssf?/base/news-19/116962458198400.xml&coll=1](http://www.nola.com/news/t-p/metro/index.ssf?/base/news-19/116962458198400.xml&coll=1)

There were a lot of lessons learned in the aftermath of the Katrina disaster. But this is one that every public safety agency in this country using a non-P25 digital standard should read and heed. From the *Picayune* article: **"The coordinated system also means that if out-of-state first responders come in as they did after Katrina to aid the locals, they'll be able to communicate as well with a bit of reprogramming of their own equipment."** That just can't happen when you are trying to use your P25 digital radio on a non-standard proprietary system.

Unfortunately, there is still one major problem on the Gulf Coast. Harrison County, Mississippi (including Biloxi and Gulfport) continue to use their ProVoice system, even though almost all of their neighbors and a new statewide trunk system being built will be P25 compatible. This is exactly the same scenario that caused major problems in New Orleans. Hancock County, the county just west of Harrison on the Louisiana border, has now installed a new P25 trunk system. Jackson County, the other Gulf Coast county just east of Harrison, is using a mixed mode (analog/P25) trunk system.

Hey, Harrison County, it's so easy a caveman could understand it – dump the proprietary digital protocol. As a taxpayer, I do not want the federal government to sink one more dime of federal money into that county until their public safety system is 100% interoperable with the rest of the world.

In Jackson, the state capital of Mississippi, the original plan was to upgrade to a ProVoice digital system by M/A-Com. But that was scrapped after issues were raised by the Hinds County E-911 Commission regarding legal concerns (the ghost of Katrina). Plans have now been made to switch Jackson over to the

Hinds County Motorola mixed mode system. This will enable true interoperability between Jackson and the surrounding area. At least someone in Mississippi is using some common sense. Are you listening, Harrison County?

There is a new Mississippi statewide trunk radio system being built, known as MWIN (Mississippi Wireless Interoperable Network). This new system will be a Motorola P25 700 MHz trunk radio system. It will be used by all of the state of Mississippi public safety agencies, with county and municipality subscription possible. MWIN will be tied in to the Mississippi Emergency Management Agency (MEMA) and the state Fish and Wildlife satellite radio nets for interoperability. As far as this new statewide system goes, Harrison County will be on the outside looking in.

## ❖ What are they thinking?!

But Harrison County, Mississippi, is only a small drop in the non-interop bucket. Another shocker can be found just two states east of Mississippi in Florida. The issue here isn't just a county issue; it involves their new statewide law enforcement trunk radio system known as SLERS. This system was bought, installed, and operated by the state of Florida. And the shocking part of this is that they are using the same trunk radio system that New Orleans just scrapped that caused all the problems during Katrina – a M/A-COM ProVoice trunk system.

Imagine a hurricane hitting Florida and the state law enforcement agencies not being able to talk to any of the feds responding to the disaster unless they give them radios for use on their non-interoperable radio system. Same applies to all the county and municipal agencies who aren't on this system, which is 99% of them. There need to be some serious questions asked about public safety by the taxpayers of Florida and the media before the next category five hurricane takes aim at the Florida Gulf or Atlantic coastlines.

Incredibly, Florida is not alone in this stupidity. There are reports of new non-P25 statewide systems being proposed or built in California, New York, and Pennsylvania! So, to all the taxpayers and politicians in these states I have just one thing to say: Make the decision to install an interoperable P25 system or forget it. "It's so easy a caveman could understand it!"