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Digital Radio Switch Upsets Firefighters

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ORLANDO, Fla. -- The city of Orlando replaced its police and fire radios, but firefighters said the new multimillion-dollar system sometimes goes silent.

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During a recent supermarket fire, firefighters were forced to use their old radios to communicate because the new system was distorted.

Noise was the problem. Warning bells on firefighters' air packs cause microphone distortion on digital signals much more than with analog channels.

"We keep on the analog tracks so that we have the clarity that we need. So, like I said, get the bugs worked out in the digital system," said Fire District Chief Keith Maddox.

The digital radio channels are also hard to hear when the firefighters are working next to trucks because the engines have to be revved to pump water.

Fire departments nationwide have known about digital signal problems for over a year, but Orlando's fire department thought that the bugs had been worked out.

"With this one, we didn't know the problem was there until recently for us," said Fire Chief Jim Reynolds.

So they conducted a test that proved the new channels were too hard to hear. The big question is, why switch the channels now when the federal government does not require it for four years?

Steve Clelland of the firefighters' union said he believes the Orlando Fire Department should have waited until the bugs got worked out before switching channels.

"It is serving us no purpose sitting there and us not being able to use it," said Clelland.

For now, firefighters will stick with the old radio channels when fighting in noisy conditions until radio makers can create a fix.

The city spent \$6.8 million to convert to the new radio system. City officials said the money would have been spent regardless of the current radio signal problem. They added that buying sooner

rather than later saved taxpayers money.

The national study results on the digital radio problem for firefighters is due out next month.

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