



Slow development of radio standards frustrates first responders

By Jill R. Aitoro 09/24/10

Delays persist in finalizing standards that would make the radios that first responders use interoperable, a problem that frustrates government officials struggling to find communication solutions in the vendor community.

Public safety professionals are developing an open suite of standards, called Project 25 or P25, for manufacturing interoperable two-way wireless communications products. But **development of the standards** continues, making compliance impossible, according to witnesses who testified before the House Technology and Innovation Subcommittee on Thursday.

"The standard is actually a suite of standards that has hundreds of subelements," said Tom Sorley, deputy director of radio communications technology for Houston. "Most people who are writing specifications to buy a new system do not know enough about the P25 suite of standards to even properly document their requirements. They fail to specify individual elements that must be compliant, and the result is systems are sold as P25-complaint when many parts of the system that could be standards-based remain proprietary."

Sorley is leading Houston's efforts to deploy one of the largest P25 radio systems nationwide. He spent months canvassing vendors to encourage response to a request for proposals. But because of a lack of interoperability, only two manufacturers were qualified to submit bids. "It was a little disheartening," Sorley said. "[A lack of standards] has a big impact on competition."

The Interior Department uses land mobile radios and systems to support law enforcement and firefighting operations across nearly all 50 states and U.S. territories. Interoperability with federal, tribal, state and local agencies is crucial, said Russ Sveda, manager of Interior's radio technical service center.

"Our mission demands not only radio A, B and C interoperate on our local system, but our users' handheld and mobile radios must also work effectively on any system in the country," he said. "The slow pace of the development of the Project 25 standards has created some frustration. We have invested 14 years into this technology, and today we are still not able to design and install a Project 25-compliant system without significant engineering and customization."

Interior will continue testing individual products until the standards are published, and the industry has matured in compliance, Sveda added.

Sorley recommended standards be released in phases that allow for incremental compliance, similar to the various versions of the IEEE 802.11 standard for wireless local area networks.

"The bottom line is P25 has so many moving parts comprised of many different standards . . . that the layperson would have no real way of determining if the products they are buying really conform," he said. "If standards are released in phases, manufacturers can deliver technologies -- as time goes on - [that] evolve to include other features, functions and capabilities. As [customers] upgrade, they won't be locked in or out of any one technology."

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