

Column: Is FirstNet Stalled?

The First Responder Network Authority is now two years into its ten-year life. But it appears to be going through a reboot. What's happening?

Government Technology

By Bill Schrier

February, 25, 2014



The short answer is no. The longer answer: maybe Today, Feb. 22, is the second anniversary of the Spectrum Act. Congress passed that law on Feb. 22, 2012. It created the First Responders' Network Authority. The law was the culmination of over a decade of advocacy by many public safety officials who saw the inadequacy of responder communications in the wake of disasters like 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, and many smaller incidents. In these incidents cops, firefighters, d paramedics and other responders found themselves unable to adequately communicate and protect the public.

FirstNet's

[mission is grand](#)

: to build the first nationwide public safety communications network for responders, especially first responders to both daily incidents and larger disasters.

Here we are, two years into the 10-year mission authorized by Congress. It has been a slow start, and lately – over the past six months – FirstNet's progress appears to have either stalled or is undergoing a reboot. This is very frustrating for those of us in states and cities who are trying our best to evangelize and support FirstNet's mission. I'm the FirstNet State Point of Contact (SPOC, commonly pronounced "spock") here in the Other Washington on the West Coast. I've been speaking to groups of public officials, police chiefs,

emergency managers, firefighters and other responders in Washington state about FirstNet since May 2013.

Lately, the mood of the audiences is starting to change. “Yeah, yeah, we’ve heard you say that before, Bill, but what’s happening now? Where’s the beef?”

I’m starting to feel a bit like a computer software salesman pushing vaporware. “Oh yes, that feature will be in our next release slated to come out in 2017.” So here’s my take on what’s going on Inside the Beltway.

1.
Here come the Bureaucrats
. There is one phrase in [the Spectrum Act](#) that causes a lot of confusion: “There is established as an independent authority within the NTIA the ‘First Responder Network Authority’ or ‘FirstNet’” (47 USC 1424 Section 6204).

An “independent authority” “within” a long-established bureaucracy? What the hell does that mean?

Well, I’m sure lawyers at NTIA and the departments of Commerce and Homeland Security, and the FCC have all been spending thousands of hours trying to figure that out.

I know if I were a head bureaucrat at Commerce or NTIA that I’d interpret it as having another function (or office or directorate or whatever the bureaucratese is) within my organization. In other words, “You report to me, FirstNet. Start acting like all other NTIA offices.”

I suspect there is an epic struggle going on within the Beltway for the control of FirstNet and its \$7 billion in funding. I don’t have direct evidence, but if you look at job descriptions that have been posted, e.g., for the Chief Information Officer, they clearly stated the FirstNet CIO would report to the NTIA CIO on a dotted line and would enforce NTIA information technology policies. We know FirstNet is subject to all federal personnel procedures for hiring staff, issuing RFPs and doing procurements. FirstNet Board members have publicly said it will take them a full year to develop, issue and receive RFPs.

So much for the “independent” part of that law.



[FirstNet Stalled? - The Information Security Magazine](#)
The information security magazine, a leading source of news and analysis on cybersecurity, has published an article titled 'FirstNet Stalled?'. The article discusses the progress of the FirstNet program, which aims to provide a nationwide public safety broadband network. It highlights the challenges faced by the program, including budget constraints and delays in the procurement process. The author, [Name], is a senior analyst at the magazine. The article is available at [https://www.ismagazine.com/firstnet-stalled/](#).

[Chicago Government Technology News Articles](#)
Chicago Government Technology News Articles, a collection of news and analysis on government technology, has published an article titled 'Chicago Government Technology News Articles'. The article discusses the latest developments in government technology, including the use of artificial intelligence, cloud computing, and data analytics. It highlights the challenges faced by government agencies in adopting new technologies and the need for better governance and oversight. The author, [Name], is a senior analyst at the magazine. The article is available at [https://www.chicagotechnews.com/](#).