

U.S. to Test In-Your-Home Disaster Warning Radio Network

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Pentagon plans wide-scale tests next month on a radio warning system it wants to put in your bedroom.

The radio receiver listens silently to a government frequency and comes to life only when the military activates it with a special, coded signal.

The aim is to save lives by broadcasting warnings of tornadoes, hurricanes, floods or nuclear attack. Installation of the radio device would be voluntary.

Originally, Civil Defense officials hoped for a law requiring that the radio receivers be built into every new television set sold in the United States.

BUT WHITE House broadcasting officials overruled the military, which runs Civil Defense operations, at least temporarily. They feared the public might interpret mandatory installation of the receivers as part of a government propaganda and spy system similar to the one used by dictator Big Brother in George Orwell's novel "1984."

In that book, government agents kept watch on citizens in their homes through closed-circuit television cameras. Big Brother could preempt any program to deliver orders or propaganda.

The Pentagon's system can only talk, not watch or listen. Regular commercial broadcasts aren't affected.

Civil Defense officials, who conceived the warning system, have built a bombproof radio transmitter near Baltimore and plan to start test broadcasts to a 10-state area in early February.

ABOUT 400 high-priced receivers are being built, and will be distributed at first only to state and local government authorities who want them.

But technicians are close to perfecting a home receiver cheap enough—about \$10—for almost anyone to afford.

The Civil Defense officials call the system DIDS, for De-

cision Information Distribution System.

Planning began in 1964, small-scale field tests were conducted in 1968 and Congress appropriated \$2 million for the first transmitter and receivers in 1970. Cost overruns have raised the initial price to \$5.7 million.

IF NEXT month's tests are successful, and if Congress goes along, the Pentagon plans eventually to build a total of 10 transmitters that together would reach nearly every corner of the nation, except Alaska and Hawaii.

The automated transmitters could be operated by remote control from the North American Air Defense Command near Colorado Springs, Colo., or at either of two back-up points.

By pushing buttons on a console, a technician at one of these control points would be able to turn on air-raid sirens, broadcast messages by voice or teletype to state and local officials, or send announcements over home receivers.

For warning of a nuclear attack, the controller could turn on every home receiver in the country. For warning of a flash flood or other natural disaster, he could turn on receivers in a certain area, in some cases as small as one-third of a single county. Specific instructions on how to cope with the disaster could be broadcast.

THE PENTAGON began thinking about improving its national warning system more than a decade ago, when missiles made the old, telephone-and-siren system obsolete.

That system, changed little today, would take an estimated 30 minutes to reach 75 per cent of the population, even under the best of circumstances.

Officials estimate the DIDS system could warn 90 per cent of the public in half a minute, if everyone had a receiver.

Furthermore the present system relies heavily on sirens that don't send many

people to cover in peacetime and may not wake up many people at night. Early tests showed DIDS receivers, using a siren-like signal about as loud as a ringing telephone, woke up almost anyone.

BEFORE SETTLING on the DIDS system the government rejected a number of other warning systems as too expensive, too unreliable or technically impractical.

Among these were proposals to ring all the nation's telephones with warnings or to send radio warnings over commercial broadcasting stations, weather bureau transmitters or satellites.

In 1971 the newly formed White House Office of Telecommunications Policy reviewed the proposals, settled on DIDS and put on ice the Pentagon's plans to put the receivers on every television set.

Making the receivers voluntary gets around the Big Brother question, but OTP officials say it also means fewer people will have the warning receivers if they ever need them.

If the international situation heats up, the government might revive the idea of mandatory receivers, officials say.

THE DIRECTOR of the

DIDS program, Robert Martin still favors a compromise plan to offer receivers as a low-cost option on television sets.

Martin sees little possibility that the DIDS system could be used for government propaganda or false warnings. Propaganda broadcasts would simply make people disable their receivers, he says. And he says the intricate control equipment will make foul-ups difficult. "We set it up in such a way that a person would have to work his tail off to make a mistake," Martin said.

That wasn't the case in 1971,* when someone at NORAD mistakenly sent a real alert instead of a test over the Emergency Broadcast System. The alert was broadcast by 2,500 stations and 40 minutes passed before it was canceled.