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How the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission can ensure that bilingual alerts are sent through the public alerting system

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1.

I am submitting the following comments regarding the improvement of the National Public Alerting System (the NPAS).
2.

As Commissioner of Official Languages of Canada, I am particularly interested in the languages in which public alerts are broadcast, since the use of both official languages makes it possible to reach 98% of Canadians (based on 2021 Census data [1](#)) and is therefore a significant factor in the effectiveness and efficiency of the NPAS.
3.

A delay in issuing alerts to the public in the second official language can jeopardize a positive outcome in the case of an alert reporting the presence of a dangerous person or the disappearance of a child. The purpose of these alerts is to mobilize as many members of society as possible as quickly as possible.
4.

In its 2025 budget, the federal government announced its intention to renew the NPAS, and proposed to provide \$55.4 million to Public Safety Canada over four years, starting in 2026-2027, as well as \$13.4 million ongoing to support a new NPAS model. The purpose of this measure is to protect various groups and ensure that alerts are accessible and bilingual, among other things [2](#).
5.

The NPAS is the result of a multi-level partnership between the public and private sectors. It is the product of a collaboration between the federal government, provincial and territorial governments, a private broadcaster—currently Pelmorex Weather Networks (Television) Inc. (Pelmorex), which is responsible for the National Alert Aggregation and Dissemination System—and last-mile distributors. The latter are over-the-air broadcasters; broadcasting, telecommunications and Internet service distribution companies; and government organizations. The result is a combination of language considerations and jurisdictions.
6.

Before I share my concerns, it is important to note that the legislative context has changed since the NPAS was launched. First, the preamble to the [Official Languages Act](#) [3](#) (the Act) now states that “all legal obligations related to the official languages apply at all times, including during emergencies.”
7.

I would also like to point out that the purpose of the Act, which is a quasi-constitutional law, is to ensure respect for Canada’s two official languages and ensure equality of status as to their use in federal institutions, in particular with respect to communicating with or providing services to the public. It now also aims to support the development of English and French linguistic minority communities in order to protect them while taking into account the fact that they have different needs. The Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (the Commission) is subject to the Act.
8.

Second, the Commission’s language obligations were further strengthened with the adoption of amendments to the *Broadcasting Act* in 2023. Specifically, subsection 5(2)(a) of the [Broadcasting Act](#) [4](#) states that the Commission shall, as part of its objects, ensure that the Canadian broadcasting system is supervised in a flexible manner that takes into account the different characteristics of English and French language broadcasting and the different conditions under which broadcasting undertakings that provide English or French language programming operate—including the minority context of French in North America—and the specific needs and interests of official language minority communities in Canada.
9.

At the same time, with the 2023 update of the Broadcasting Policy for Canada provided for in the *Broadcasting Act*, the concept of services being extended “as resources become available” with regard to linguistic duality was removed. In fact, this concept was seen as outdated given the potential of online undertakings [5](#). The Commission should therefore take this new approach into consideration.
10.

The Broadcasting Policy for Canada also now clearly states that “while sharing common aspects, English and French language broadcasting operate under different conditions—in particular, the minority context of French in North America—and may have different requirements” and that “the Canadian broadcasting system should promote innovation and be readily adaptable to scientific and technological change [6](#).”
11.

This brings me to the challenges observed with regard to the NPAS, in terms of official languages.
12.

In 2021-2022, I participated in the work of the Mass Casualty Commission, which led to several recommendations, two of which are of particular interest to me. The first called for a fundamental review of the alerting system by the various levels of government to establish a national framework for public alerting led by Public Safety Canada but pursuant to national standards [7](#). The second recommendation called for a review of the NPAS, to be undertaken every three years that considers the diverse needs of people living in Canada, including official language minority communities [8](#).
13.

The COVID-19 pandemic and several incidents brought to my attention led to the publication of my report [A Matter of Respect and Safety: The Impact of Emergency Situations on Official Languages](#) in 2020. In this report, I recommended that various federal institutions take measures to improve access to security for Canadians, regardless of their official language preference or geographical location in Canada.
14.

In my report, I referred to a 2019 investigation into a series of incidents in which NPAS alerts were sent solely in English. I had noticed that there were cases where last-mile distributors broadcasted information in only one official language, even when the original alert from emergency management organizations (EMOs)—that is, organizations that manage emergencies at the provincial and territorial levels—was bilingual. I concluded that the Commission should have banned this practice, and I recommended that the Commission end it by modifying the following sections of Broadcasting Regulatory Policy CRTC, 2014-444:

41.

The Commission considers that EMOs are ultimately responsible for alerting the public and are therefore in the best position to deal with official-language and third-language issues. It acknowledges that the creation of timely emergency alert messages by EMOs in both English and French may not be possible in all situations.

42.

The Commission also notes that the [NPAS Common Look and Feel Guidance 1.0] provides guidance with respect to language. Accordingly, the Commission does not consider it necessary to set out provisions relating to the broadcast of emergency alert messages that specify the language in which such messages must be broadcast. It nevertheless encourages EMOs to create emergency alert messages in both official languages and to discuss third-language options with broadcasters. In addition, the Commission encourages the broadcasting industry to consult with EMOs in regard to the language of emergency alert messages for bilingual markets, as well as to explore solutions regarding third-language alerting. In this regard, the Commission does not consider broadcasters or [broadcasting distribution undertakings] to be responsible for the translation of emergency alert messages [9](#).
15.

However, the “Official Language Considerations” in Common Look and Feel Guidance Version 2.1 [10](#) was amended. My team analyzed the added nuances in the Guidance and concluded that it is still not mandatory to broadcast emergency communications of equal quality in both languages simultaneously. Here are some supporting examples:

○

Section 8.2.2 – “**Whenever possible and practical** [*our emphasis*], alerting authorities should include audience alert messages in both official languages, in both text and audio versions.”

○

Section 8.2.4 – “**Preferably** [*our emphasis*], the English and French text and audio audience alert messages from alerting authorities will be similarly complete. [That is,] both will include the same event reference, location references, instructions, etc. **It is understood this may not be possible and/or practical** for all alerting authorities [*our emphasis*].”

○

Section 8.2.8 – “If an audience alert message is present for only **one of the two official languages** [*our emphasis*], it should be used [11](#).”
16.

I would like to note that during the administrative renewal of Pelmorex’s licence and mandatory distribution orders until August 31, 2026, the Commission stated that it would have sufficient time to modernize its regulatory frameworks in response to the new *Broadcasting Act* and to implement the appropriate changes [12](#). I am still hopeful that this will include an update to Broadcasting Regulatory Policy CRTC, 2014-444 and Broadcasting Orders. This policy needs to be updated to reflect the legislative developments in recent years regarding the protection and promotion of official languages.
17.

Note that Pelmorex’s licence from the Commission enables it to operate the National Alert Aggregation and Dissemination System, which is the system that collects, validates and publishes emergency alerts from authorized government agencies across Canada. However, Common Look and Feel Guidance for last-mile distributors does not require emergency communications of equal quality to be issued in both official languages simultaneously. As a result, these distributors are still able to publish unilingual alerts.
18.

That being said, I welcome the initiative of Pelmorex, which stated to the Commission that it was working on integrating a new translation tool into the National Alert Aggregation and Dissemination System that will allow alert issuers to create a text and audio file in both official languages. Pelmorex anticipates that this solution will be live in the System as of March 2026 [13](#).
19.

The fact remains, however, that the best way to ensure that alerts are bilingual would be for the Commission to add licensing conditions regarding language obligations and strengthen its influence on emergency management organizations in order to prevent NPAS from continuing to issue alerts in only one official language.
20.

As I concluded in my 2025 follow-up report, [Revisiting the A Matter of Respect and Safety: The Impact of Emergency Situations on Official Languages report and recommendations](#), there is still a great deal of work to be done to ensure that emergency communications of equal quality in both official languages are widely disseminated simultaneously in English and French.
21.

In closing, I would like to point out that failing to issue public alerts in both official languages during emergency situations constitutes a barrier to the health and safety of Canadians. I understand that responsibility for the NPAS is currently shared, but it is necessary for one entity to ensure that alerts are of equal quality in both official languages and disseminated simultaneously in both English and French at all times.

Raymond Thériège

Footnotes

- 1

Statistics Canada, [“Linguistic diversity in Canada: Shedding light on 2021 Census data on non-official languages”](#), January 22, 2025.
- 2

Government of Canada, [Canada Strong – Budget 2025](#) [3](#), Chapter 4 – Protecting Canada’s Sovereignty and Security, 4.2 Protecting Our Borders and Communities, pages 194 and 198.
- 3

[Legislative Summary of Bill C-11: Online Streaming Act](#) [4](#), section 2.2b.
- 4

[Broadcasting Act](#) [5](#), Broadcasting Policy for Canada, subsections 3(1)(c) and 3(1)(d)(iv).
- 5

[Final Report of the Mass Casualty Commission: Executive Summary and Recommendations](#) [6](#), Recommendation C.4, Fundamental Review of Alert Ready, pages 180 and 181.
- 6

[Final Report of the Mass Casualty Commission: Executive Summary and Recommendations](#) [7](#), Recommendation C.5, Triennial Review of the National Public Alerting System, page 181.
- 7

[Broadcasting Regulatory Policy CRTC 2014-444 and Broadcasting Orders CRTC 2014-445, 2014-446, 2014-447 and 2014-448](#) | CRTC [8](#), Language of emergency alert messages, Commission’s analysis, sections 41 and 42.
- 8

Common Look and Feel Guidance is managed by federal, provincial and territorial senior officials who are responsible for emergencies for last-mile distributors. It is published on Public Safety Canada’s website. [Common Look and Feel Guidance Version 2.1](#) [9](#).
- 9

[Common Look and Feel Guidance Version 2](#) [10](#), Official Language Considerations, sections 8.2.2, 8.2.4 and 8.2.8.
- 10

[Broadcasting Decision CRTC 2023-245](#) [11](#)
- 11

[Pelmorex Weather Networks’ response to notice CRTC 2025-180](#) [12](#), intervention 98, filed on December 19, 2025 (consulted on January 8, 2026).

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