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Electric Vehicles Need AM Radio, Former Emergency Officials Argue

Ex-FEMA heads say band is important in emergencies, but auto makers note signal interference



Auto makers including Ford, the maker of the F-150 Lightning, have dropped AM radio from newer EV models.

PHOTO: MICHAEL NAGLE/BLOOMBERG NEWS

By *Ryan Felton* [Follow](#)

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The lack of AM radio in some new electric vehicles could cut off drivers from important safety alerts broadcast over the medium, warned a group of former emergency officials in a letter Sunday.

Auto makers such as Ford Motor Co. **F -4.08%** ▼ and Tesla Inc. **TSLA -4.99%** ▼ have dropped AM radio from newer EV models. Car companies say the motors on such vehicles generate electromagnetic frequencies on the same wavelength as AM radio signals, creating buzzing and signal fading from the interference.

The government should seek assurances that auto makers will maintain AM radio in cars, said seven former Federal Emergency Management Agency administrators in a letter Sunday to Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg and some congressional committees that was viewed by The Wall Street Journal.

The issue, the former officials say, is that AM radio serves as a linchpin of the

One issue, the former officials say, is that AM radio serves as a backbone of the infrastructure behind the federal National Public Warning System, which provides emergency-alert and warning information from FEMA to the public during natural disasters and extreme weather events.

“When all else fails, radio stations are often the last line of communications that communities have,” Craig Fugate, the head of FEMA during the Obama administration, said in an interview. Mr. Fugate is one of the signers of the letter.

More than 75 radio stations, most of which operate on the AM band and cover at least 90% of the U.S. population, are equipped with backup communications equipment and generators that allow them to continue broadcasting information to the public during and after an emergency, FEMA said.

“Should this continue, it will represent a grave threat to future local, state, and federal disaster response and relief efforts,” the letter said.

An estimated 47 million people listen to AM radio, according to media-tracking firm Nielsen.

While drivers nowadays can use smartphones and other tech to dial up their favorite radio stations, the signal keeping those services online isn’t as reliable as AM radio during emergency events, the former FEMA officials said.

The Transportation Department didn’t respond to a request for comment. Antwane Johnson, director of FEMA’s emergency-warning system, said that removing AM radio in EVs could affect the ability of people to receive critical public-safety information while in their vehicles.

“AM radio has been tested over and over during the most devastating natural disasters—and has withstood them all,” said Mr. Johnson, who didn’t sign the letter.

Ford in the fall said it would remove AM radio from 2023 model year F-150 Lightning electric trucks, after having it in earlier models.

“The frequencies involved in AM radio tend to be directly affected by the electromagnetic noise in EV propulsion systems,” Ford said in a written statement.

Sen. Ed Markey (D., Mass.) called attention to the issue in December when he wrote to 20 EV manufacturers, asking about their future EV plans and whether they include AM radio.

In response, the Alliance for Automotive Innovation, an industry group that represents major car makers in the U.S., told Mr. Markey that it is committed to maintaining access to safety alerts, according to a letter provided by a spokesman for the group.

The alliance has been meeting with the National Association of Broadcasters to discuss the issue, the group's letter said, and it is in the preliminary stages of engaging FEMA to better understand how consumers can continue to access emergency-broadcast alerts in their vehicles.

Curtis LeGeyt, president and chief executive of the National Association of Broadcasters, said the conversations so far have been productive.

"They're in the business of public safety," Mr. LeGeyt said of auto makers, "and AM radio is a really big part of it."

Some auto makers have AM radio installed in their EVs.

During a December snowstorm in Buffalo, N.Y., WBEN-AM remained operational, and on-air hosts took calls from residents.

PHOTO: JOED VIERA/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

Hyundai Motor Group [HYMLY 0.00%](#) , which makes the Ioniq 5 electric sport-utility vehicle, said that AM radio is available on all of its vehicles distributed in the U.S. and that it has no plans to discontinue AM in future products.

Toyota Motor Corp. [TM -0.85%](#) said electromagnetic interference with AM radio signals from the battery electric platform is a challenge. As of now, all of its cars come with AM, including its all-electric Toyota bZ4X SUV and the coming battery-powered Lexus RZ450e SUV.

Tim Wenger, brand manager of WBEN-AM in Buffalo, N.Y., said AM continues to play an important role for communities around the U.S.

During a punishing snowstorm in December that left dozens dead, WBEN remained operational, said Mr. Wenger, and on-air hosts took calls from residents.

Mr. Wenger said one caller dialed in to the station multiple times, saying he was diabetic and stranded in his car. The caller was rescued after the station broadcast his story, he said.

“His only connection to the world was an AM radio station,” Mr. Wenger said.

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