Life or Death Threat LightSquared

A representative of one of the founding members of the Coalition to Save Our GPS said on 29th June 2011 that the interference posed to the Global Positioning System (GPS) by LightSquared's planned deployment of 40,000 ground stations "could literally become a matter of life and death" when it affects communications and location technology used by first responders and other public safety officials. He addressed the SAFECOM Emergency Response Council.

Referring to a recent report by the National Public Safety Telecommunications Council (NPSTC), Jim Kirkland, vice president and general counsel of Trimble, said that its tests "confirmed that interference to public safety operations will occur" if LightSquared's plan are allow to proceed.

He noted that ambulances, police and fire department vehicles may miss critically important information or lose precious time in reaching the scene of an accident or crime because of interference with GPS signals. Kirkland quoted the report when it said, "Denial-of-GPS-Service to portable devices represents perhaps the largest concern to the Public Safety market. Officers rely on 'Man-Down' signalling for immediate response under life and death situations. In certain circumstances, an officer may be unable to voice their location; GPS tracking is the only backup they may have for rescue or aid."

He also raised the issue of interference with cellular phones, which the NPSTC noted now exceed 70% of all E911 calls made in some locations, a percentage that is expected to increase, and pointed out that the NPSTC reported that, "Interference to GPS services, particularly location reporting, directly impacts the ability of Public Safety services to respond in a timely manner to received calls."

Kirkland also recounted the results of tests on first responder and other public safety vehicles conducted by the National Space-Based PNT Advisory Board, which provides advice to the US government on space-based positioning, navigation and timing matters. Its tests show first responders face interference problems from LightSquared's planned operations.

The tests showed that a state police cruiser lost GPS reception when within 600 feet of a tower like those LightSquared plans and that the police headquarters communications operation could not locate the cruiser on its tracking system. After leaving the vicinity of the LightSquared transmitter, the cruiser was unable to re-establish location-based services. For ambulances, the tests found that there was no solution for the interference the ambulances experienced within 1,000 feet of the test tower and that the tests generated false readings such as reporting the ambulance was going 9mph when it was in fact stationary. There was a similar problem for fire department vehicles, with no solution for the interference suffered within 1,000 feet of the test tower. The tests caused the fire department system to report the last known location of the fire department vehicle to be in a location that was not near its actual position.

Kirkland was addressing the summer meeting of the SAFECOM Emergency Response Council, hosting the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Office of Emergency Communications (OEC). The gathering gives public safety stakeholders from across the country the opportunity to provide input to the OEC on "timely interoperability-related issues." The SAFECOM ERC includes individuals from federal, state, local and tribal emergency response and policy maker communities who meet to share best practices and lessons.