The need for true interoperability and improved communication among public safety agencies and first responders has always been a problem. However, it first really came to public consciousness in the wake of the tragic events of 9-11. Now, over a decade later, while lessons have been learned and improvements have been made, frustrations over poor communications and interoperability issues continue during almost any natural disaster or crisis, that requires interagency response.

Lack of interoperability has still had a negative impact on response during several high-profile incidents in the US since 9-11, including the Oklahoma City Bombing, the Columbine School shootings, and more recently the Aurora Colorado Theater shooting.

In an attempt to finally seriously address this issue, in February 2012, the U.S. Congress enacted The Middle Class Tax Relief and Job Creation Act of 2012, which contained landmark provisions to create the much-needed nationwide interoperable broadband “First Responder Network.” The agency that was created to govern the framework and oversee deployment and operation of this network, which will be based on a single, national network architecture, is known as the “First Responder Network Authority,” or FirstNet. FirstNet is an independent authority within the National Telecommunications & Information Administration (NTIA). According to the act that created FirstNet, “FirstNet will hold the spectrum license for the network, and is charged with taking all actions necessary to build, deploy, and operate the network, in consultation with
Federal, State, tribal and local public safety entities, and other key stakeholders.”

It is an ambitious project, and one that is long overdue, with many wondering what is its current status? That question is something The Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Communications and Technology tried to get answered during hearings back in March of 2013. Testifying before the Committee, Sam Ginn, Chairman of FirstNet said, “Deploying a public safety grade wireless broadband network with the scale of U.S. nationwide geographic coverage is an international first. The FirstNet network will be distinctive from all other networks in two critical ways. First, it will be the only network that is ever built entirely to public safety-level specifications for security and reliability. Second, it will be the only network to cover an entire nation of our size geographically, as opposed to coverage by population centers. Combine these two features and you begin to see just how groundbreaking – and challenging – our task is.”

A running theme throughout the hearing was, in order for FirstNet to be successful, it is going to require an unprecedented level of cooperation between State and Federal authorities and emergency managers. Which is a task that many believe means weeding through a bureaucracy that could be as difficult to battle as any blaze!

Chris McIntosh, Virginia’s Statewide Interoperability Coordinator, said to the committee, “FirstNet cannot be expected to understand each state’s unique circumstances and needs. It is through a partnership between the states and localities, their existing governance structures, and the FirstNet board that this program will be successful.” His thoughts were echoed by Ray Lehr, Director of Maryland’s Statewide Communications Interoperability Program, who testified, “Only the states and local public safety leaders can speak to their needs. This early input will ensure the network meets the expectations of each community…”

In or Out?
States do have the opportunity to “opt out” of FirstNet, but Ginn and other FirstNet ranking members believe most will opt-in. In previous statements unrelated to the March 2013 subcommittee hearings, the FirstNet Board of Directors has said, “The governors pushed and lobbied for this legislation for years. They see a need for a nationwide broadband network. To be successful, FirstNet will need as many users as possible to bring down the cost.”

FirstNet supporters say the Network’s success will not only be predicated on willingness of local telecoms to get on board and opt-in, but a willingness of First Responders to use it. “This has been a long-standing goal since the communications failures of 9/11,” said Heather Hogsett, director of the Health and Homeland Security Committee for the National Governors Association. “The challenge for the FirstNet board will be to build a network that first responders want to use. It must be appealing to police and fire departments and delivered at a cost that makes it feasible.”

Specifically, as signed into law, the FirstNet board is charged with seven responsibilities:

1. Hold the spectrum license for FirstNet.
2. Develop a plan for network build-out, maintenance and sustained operations in each state.
3. Ensure nationwide standards for network use and access.
4. Deliver economies of scale for public safety entities.
7. Consult with local, state, tribal, territorial and federal entities.

While obstacles remain, the Board is confident that its initial plans for construction of the Network will be rolled out by late 2014.