



New ASTRID paging system for volunteers of all emergency services in Belgium

This weekend ASTRID completed the changeover from its old paging system to the new one. Paging is used by the fire brigades and emergency services to call volunteers who are equipped with pagers through which they can receive alert notices. The important preparations for renovating the infrastructure and ensuring continuity of the service provision in the future started one year ago. ASTRID worked closely together with the user organisations throughout the entire process. During the changeover on Saturday, June 4th 2016, ASTRID constantly kept users informed about the course of events. The technically complex migration was completed in four hours (between 8 AM and noon), during which time the paging service was interrupted. Following several months of preparation, the technical teams from ASTRID and its suppliers have done their utmost to ensure a smooth transition. After the switchover of the 226 antennas in various locations all over the country, the pagers of the volunteer firefighters and emergency responders as well as the alarm terminals at the fire stations automatically connected to the new system. On the Saturday afternoon the teams carried out on-site technical maintenance on 30 antennas. More than 2.3 million pages pass through the paging network every year. Radio communication was not interrupted during the switchover operation as it did not involve the ASTRID TETRA radio network.

Necessary works

Certain components of the old paging system had become outdated (2001) or had reached end-of-life status and the supplier was no longer able to offer maintenance or a replacement. The paging service is a quintessential tool for calling volunteer firefighters to the fire station. After consultation with the users it was decided to re-opt for POCSAG, a proven and widely used technology standard that continues to meet the operational needs of the emergency services. The renewal of the paging system encompasses the replacement of the network core and its auxiliary system (consolidated in three data centres), the gradual replacement of the emitters on the antennas, and the addition of certain features with added value for the users. After completion of a public procurement awarded in 2015 to the company Thales, the paging technology will be brought up to date from the previous system. This will allow for a reduction in operational costs at the same time.

The users of the paging system

A pager is a device through which volunteers can receive short messages (e.g.: “Urgent intervention – house fire”) or codes transmitted by the station. The main users of this simple and efficient alerting system are the (voluntary) fire brigade, the Civil Protection Service, several medical emergency services, doctors, hospitals and the Red Cross. The system allows for sending an alarm message simultaneously to a large number of volunteers who possess a pager and are located outside the station (at work or at home). Approximately 6,400 alarm messages pass through the ASTRID paging network every day. Paging subscriptions are free of charge for emergency zones (fire brigade) and public emergency services.

Christophe Grégoire, Chief Operations Officer at ASTRID:

“This technological upgrade offers a direct operational benefit to the users in the field, i.e. the 12,000 volunteer firefighters who are active throughout Belgium. In addition, it ensures continuity of the paging service for another 15 years. I would like to thank all of the users and everyone who has participated in the works for their contribution to this complex migration effort.”

Features and benefits of the new paging system:

- Messages are transmitted faster as a result of more rapid processing in the centralised system
- Better redundancy: The centralised systems are redundant and constantly exchange their data between them
- Advanced system monitoring from the ASTRID Service Centre
- No need to replace the 21,000 pagers already in use in the field
- Guaranteed technological support from the supplier of the infrastructure (Thales) for the next 15 years
- New key features in the longer term:
 - Encryption of messages
 - Transmission of acknowledgment of receipt
 - Automatic re-transmission effort in case of failed delivery

The Technology

The ASTRID paging network consists of 226 antennas dispersed through Belgium as well as centralised management systems (servers). Alarm messages are sent from the server to the antennas, which in turn forward them to the pagers. The technology underlying the ASTRID paging network is based on the POCSAG standard. The system allows emergency services to quickly send and receive messages throughout the whole country. The ASTRID paging network offers maximum indoor coverage. Paging messages can be transmitted to pagers by phone, via an ASTRID radio or very specifically via a PC or alarm terminal.

----- End of press release -----

CONTACT: Frederik Langhendries - GSM 0496/59 57 14 - Email fred.lang@astrid.be - www.astrid.be

ASTRID is the specialised telecommunications operator for all emergency and security services in Belgium. ASTRID facilitates communication between police, fire brigades and emergency services. Efficient communication contributes considerably to efficient intervention procedures. ASTRID is an initiative of the federal government and supports multidisciplinary cooperation via a unique and polyvalent communication platform for all of the emergency services. Each day the ASTRID systems process over 56,000 group calls, 6,400 calls to volunteer helpers and 7,800 emergency calls from citizens to the 100-101-112 emergency centres.