

HAM RADIO TO REMAIN HELPFUL DURING HURRICANE SEASON

The Observer Newspapers 7-28-10



The TEAC's Field Days in Roman Forest had several members like Alex Traxler, left, and Ken MacLeod operating radios.

By **ARIANNA AUBER**

Updated: 07.28.10

When the power was out in the aftermath of Hurricane Ike almost two years ago, amateur radio, also called ham radio, provided crucial communication for emergency services like FEMA. And during this new hurricane season, it will be there again.

Responsible for ham radio in this area is the local club Texas Emergency Amateur Communicators, or TEAC, a group of about 70 members who use their hobby to serve the community during emergencies when all other communications fail.

"Ham radio is not just something your old uncle Harry dabbled with way back when," said Chuck Sprick, a member of TEAC. "It's still relevant and uses updated technology to support and amplify old technology."

This updated technology, such as satellites and the Internet, allows amateur radio operators to connect with other operators as far away as Australia, said Glen Rekeweg, another member of TEAC.

He added that a downloadable program called Airmail even permits amateur radio operators to send e-mail using their radios. This program was helpful in the weeks following Ike when many Houston residents had no phone or Internet service.

The usefulness of ham radio during a crisis extends beyond merely sending e-mail, however.

Some members of TEAC participate in another group, the Amateur Radio Emergency Service, or ARES, which becomes activated if the agencies it serves, such as the Community Response Task Force, need help during an emergency.

Through ARES, TEAC, with members stretching from Kingwood to Roman Forest, operated at the 26 points of distribution (PODs) around Harris County to provide residents with a continued supply of food and water once Ike hit.

"We were on the radio before Ike, making sure things were operational," said Sprick, who is also the Northeast Unit coordinator of ARES. (NOTE: This is an error. The current EC is Allen Shuff, W9ON) "During Ike, we were hunkered down like everyone else. Once it passed, we drove around looking for downed trees and radioed the FEMA supply base when water, ice or food was running low at the PODs."

Because tractor trailers carrying the supplies were having trouble transporting them through debris left by Ike, ham radio operators let the supply base know exactly what was needed.

But the operators were not on their radios constantly, or the batteries would've run out of juice. They were on the air about every 30 minutes to an hour, sending out the most crucial information, Rekeweg

said.

As a result of their efforts, the PODs, used for about a week after Ike, ran as smoothly as they could under the circumstances, Sprick said.

In the event of another hurricane or similar emergency, these ham radio operators will be needed again. In the meantime, they keep busy with other events, Rekeweg said.

One way TEAC members continue to help using their hobby is through getting involved in the BP MS 150, a two-day bike tour from Houston to Austin that raises money for people with multiple sclerosis. TEAC sets up communication at rest stops for the bikers.

Another yearly event is Field Day, a public demonstration of emergency communications' abilities.

"Field Day is a good way for us ham operators to stay in practice for hurricanes," Rekeweg said. "We set up and run off of generators. Since the technology is always changing, giving ham radio new capabilities, it helps us keep on top of things."

Field Day took place on June 26 and 27 at the Roman Forest City Hall.

To operate a ham radio, a technician's license is required. TEAC offers classes twice a year that go toward acquiring a license.

Rekeweg encourages everyone to get licensed.

"A license for ham radio is just like a driver's license," Rekeweg said. "You may have no intent to drive, but you have it just in case. The same goes for ham radio. You never know when all communications will go down, but the ham radio will always be available."

As hurricane season enters its zenith, Rekeweg's words come as a promise that ham radio will help Houston if another Ike comes along.