



New Mexico Amateur Radio

Press Release



Contact: Charlie Christmann, K5CEC
Phone: (505) 771-0097 / 505-238-0644
k5cec@arrl.net

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
12:00 p.m., February 21, 2006

HIGH MARKS FOR HAMS DURING HURRICANE

"When all else fails ... Amateur Radio". After multiple hurricanes slammed into the U.S. Gulf Coast, Government officials from the local level to the federal level have rediscovered the meaning of that slogan. Thousands of Amateur Radio Operators, also known as Hams, volunteered their time and equipment to help out after Katrina decimated communications systems in Georgia, Mississippi and Louisiana. Ham radio operators in New Mexico are trained and ready to respond in the event disaster strikes closer to home.

In the final report of the Select Bipartisan Committee to investigate the preparation for and response to Hurricane Katrina, Amateur Radio was cited for its contribution to the relief efforts. In the report, *"A Failure of Initiative"*, the committee notes that, "Like all levels of government, National Communication System was not able to address all aspects of the damage to the communications infrastructure of the Gulf States." More than a thousand Hams across the United States volunteered their time and equipment to help wherever they were needed.

New Mexico is lucky in that hurricanes and tsunamis do not normally devastate our state. But the potential for disastrous fires, tornadoes, and flooding is ever present. Though state government is beefing up its communications capabilities, it still relies heavily on the wired and cellular telephone networks, the intranet, and microwave links that are vulnerable to man-made and natural disasters. Interoperability with radio equipment and frequency assignments is also a problem, preventing quick, reliable communications between agencies. Amateur radio is widely distributed with individual hams able to provide services as

~ MORE ~

needed with portable gear on common radio frequencies. Hams are not dependent upon any type of infrastructure to communicate anywhere in New Mexico, the United States, or the world.

Amateur Radio Emergency Service® (ARES®) members are always training so that they will be ready if disaster should strike. Several times each year, Hams participate with local, state, and federal officials in Simulated Emergency Tests so that everyone knows what the other's capabilities and responsibilities will be. Federal training courses are also required for all hams in New Mexico who participate in any type of emergency response, including the Federal Emergency Management Agency's IS-700 and IS-800 courses as the minimum. Many Hams have also completed one or more Emergency Communications courses provided by the American Radio Relay League (ARRL). This training, and the professionalism displayed by "amateurs", is why Ham radio gets high marks for its service during real emergencies.

Most Emergency Operations Centers, fire stations, and evacuation shelters in New Mexico do not have amateur radio gear permanently installed on-site. ARES members often must set-up their personal equipment in these locations to provide communications. There are VHF and UHF repeater systems throughout the state maintained by individuals and amateur radio clubs; these repeaters are generally available when an emergency occurs.

When the hurricanes struck the Gulf Coast in 2005, several amateur radio organizations sprang into action to provide communications for governmental and relief agencies. Congress lauded them for their service.

The congressional report on Katrina cited the Military Amateur Radio Service (MARS) for its role as part of the Shared Resources High Frequency Radio Program (SHARES), an emergency federal communication system put into play when other resources are unavailable. The report says that "within days" of Katrina's landfall, NCS called upon more than 430 SHARES stations across the US to, among other things, assist first responders conducting search-and-rescue missions by relaying information to government agencies, by relaying logistical and operational information among FEMA EOCs in Georgia,

Mississippi and Louisiana, and by handling health-and-welfare messages between volunteer agencies in Georgia and the American Red Cross national headquarters.

"Additionally, the NCS coordinated the frequencies used by the nearly 1000 Amateur Radio Emergency Service (ARES) volunteers across the nation who served in the Katrina stricken area providing communications for government agencies, the Red Cross and The Salvation Army." The report continued, "Emergency communications were conducted not only by voice, but also by high-speed data transmissions using state-of-the art digital communications software known as *Winlink*."

The Salvation Army, the report pointed out, operates its own system of Amateur Radio volunteers known as Salvation Army Team Emergency Radio Network (SATERN). "During the Hurricane Katrina response and recovery effort, SATERN joined forces with the SHARES program and received over 48,000 requests for emergency communications assistance utilizing federal frequencies made available via the SHARES program," the report noted.

"The extent of destruction and damage to the communications infrastructure and services caused by Katrina exceeded that of any other natural disaster experienced by the Gulf Coast states," the report concluded. "Simply put, Katrina's devastation overwhelmed government resources at all levels."

Jim Haynie, ARRL president, said in testimony before the House Government Reform Committee in September 2005, "As has been proven consistently and repeatedly in the past, when communications systems fail due to a wide-area or localized natural disaster, Amateur Radio works, right away, all the time. This report is not, therefore, a statement of concern about what must be changed or improved. It is, rather, a report on what is going right, and what works, in emergency communications in the Gulf Coast, and what can be depended on to work the next time there is a natural disaster, and the times after that." Haynie concluded his report by stating, "The Committee should be aware that this vast volunteer resource is always at the disposal of the federal government. The United States absolutely can rely on the Amateur Radio Service. Amateur Radio provides immediate, high-quality communications that work every time, when all else fails."

In the past few years, New Mexico Hams have been called upon several times for duty:

- Cerro Grande fires in Los Alamos – May 2000
- La Cueva Fire – March 2003
- Virgin Fire – June 2003
- Sandoval and Lincoln Counties forest fires – 2003 and 2004
- Northern New Mexico river flood watch – Spring 2005
- Albuquerque, Katrina Refuges – September 2005
- Southeastern New Mexico Range Fires – January 2006
- Eastern New Mexico SkyWarn weather spotting – Every Summer

Other event organizers have recognized the need for communications and local Hams are happy to help with safety and coordination:

- Duke City Marathon
- Run for the Zoo
- Bicycle Rally
- Santa Fe Century Bike Tour
- La Luz Run
- American Diabetes Association
- Tour de Cure
- “Oh My God” Motocross Race
- Special Olympics Torch Run
- Race to Sandia Crest
- MS 150 Atomic Tour
- Crop Walk

The American radio relay League has formal agreements with several national organizations that provide for emergency services:

- Department of Homeland Security – Citizen Corps
- Federal Emergency Management Agency
- National Communications System
- American Red Cross
- Salvation Army
- National Weather Service
- Civil Air Patrol
- Association of Public Safety Communications Officials

Additional Information

A Failure of Initiative report: www.gpoaccess.gov/katrinareport/mainreport.pdf

Amateur Radio Emergency Service: www.arrl.org/ares

Military Amateur Radio Service: <http://www.marsgateway.net/>

American Radio Relay League web site: www.arrl.org

Bernalillo County ARES: www.bc-ares.org

Los Alamos Amateur Radio Club: www.laarc.org

New Mexico Search And Rescue Support: www.nmsarsupport.org

Sandoval County ARES: www.nmscares.org

A complete list of New Mexico Amateur Radio organizations can be found at www.swcp.com/~n5zgt

Note: Amateur Radio Emergency Service and ARES are trademarks of the American Radio Relay League.

- End -