

KNW-153

MAJOR EMERGENCY EVENT PREPAREDNESS

Extracted material from article titles "The Big One" by Jim A. Wades - WB8SIW

Many EMCOM events seem to place Amateur Radio in the background. Often amateur radio operators take the position of emergency management volunteer with access to radio communications as an added benefit. Hopefully disasters where amateur radio fills the role to replace a failed public safety or government telecommunications system will be seldom. If the opportunities to practice the necessary skills are seldom then one can be lead to a false sense of preparedness.

A radio amateur operator who participates in local exercises or public events will learn a lot about communications but must not believe they are prepared to function efficiently in a major emergency event. Have you asked yourselves: have I taken the proper training, practiced that training, and am I properly equipped and prepared physical and mentally to provide effective communication for a real major emergency situation.

Some people believe that EMCOM capabilities are no longer needed so they do not prepare. Stories where the Internet, Skype, e-mail, and other internet services have been used to connect families in recent emergency events has lead people to believe the Internet, satellite phones, etc. can survive major disasters. These stories fail to convey that people outside the affected area where involved to make this type of communication successful.

As many of us have experience personally, major disaster events take out the modern communication systems for many miles around the center of the affected disaster area. This fact can cause concerns and problems for EMCOM volunteers.

Gasoline:

Just because you have a generator to operator your equipment does not mean you are in good shape. If your generator is equipped only to run on gasoline you may be surprised. Without power to the affected area gasoline pumps will not work. I have personally been at a gasoline station which was at that moment receiving a supply of gasoline from a tanker truck. But this station had absolutely no way to deliver that fuel to customers without electricity because they did not have a generator. Tanker trucks are rarely capable of delivering gasoline directly to customers. Even if gasoline can be supplied, it will likely be rationed.

Your disaster plan must take into account the loss of the supply of gasoline. A generator which can run on natural gas and the fittings, hoses etc. needed to connect to natural gas may be something you want to add to your emergency kit.

Being able to operate on alternate power sources on low power is something you need to understand and plan for. Having batteries which you can periodically charge in a short time period from a generator is better than running the generator full time.

Transportation:

Many EMCOM volunteer activities require the operator to travel to the disaster location. Without gasoline that will be difficult. Keeping a half tank of gas in your vehicle at all time is a

good practice. Some disasters give advance warning so you can stock up on extra fuel to some degree.

Disasters typically damage roads and bridges, block roads with trees and distribute a lot of debris which causes multiple flat tires. Do you have the supplies and air compressor needed to fix those flats? Do you have other means and physical strength to get to the disaster area with your equipment? Portable repeaters, cross-band repeat radios, NVIS capability can be used to extend the range of communication. Handheld transceivers will not provide what is needed in many of the major disaster situations.

Communication

Participation in public service events gives some training and practice in communications but what if you must transmit and receive genuine emergency traffic. Actual disasters require practiced communication skills, understanding of standard procedures and forms along with relationships with governmental personnel. Are you prepared to set up a message center in any given location without any infrastructure and be able to communicate health and welfare messages? Ask these additional questions:

- Can you format a message without a blank form?
- Can you transmit the proper ITU phonetic for difficult to spell words like Methyl Isocyanate, Methyl Mercaptan, a known disease like Shigellosis, or a new disease and ensure there is not miscommunication on the other end of the communication.

Amateur radio operators should be communicators first. The ability to communicate a message through multiple paths in a consistent, accurate, and efficient manner should be the primary skills we develop. Are you able to set up a reliable and efficient radio communication station within a disaster area? Or are you prepared to go into a Transtar or OEM location and serve as a communicator. Do you have the necessary security clearance and credentials? Do those agency personnel know you personally? Most important, know your skills and capability. If your skills and preparedness are not up to the tasks then work on improving them. The opportunity to use the preparedness and skills talked about tonight may present itself sooner than you think.