



Amateur Radio Plays A Much-Needed Part In The Alabama Department of Homeland Security Communications Interoperability Exercise



It was a meeting of hearts, minds . . . and radios the week of May 4th – May 8th which brought together emergency responders and support personnel in Robertsdale, Alabama for an essential communications interoperability training and full-scale exercise, sponsored by The Alabama Department of Homeland Security, to help improve emergency preparedness communication in the State of Alabama.

Personnel gathered in a field near the Baldwin County EOC to test the quality and effectiveness of communications between State agencies and support personnel. The exercise was a simulated Category 5 Hurricane, entering Mobile Bay and causing statewide damage.

Those in attendance included Alabama Emergency Management, Alabama National Guard, Alabama Department of Public Safety, FEMA Region IV, eight Alabama Regional Communication vehicles, Alabama ABC Board, Virtual Alabama, Alabama Civil Air Patrol, Sheriff's office and ARRL Amateur Radio Emergency Service Operators from SEMA Region 1 and other regions throughout the state.

A communications emergency can be caused when a critical communication system failure can put the public at risk. This failure can include, but is not limited to, overload or damage to critical day-to-day communication systems, caused by telephone lines or radio towers destroyed, an increase in a communication system which causes overload, or the failure of any key component in a system that can cause widespread consequences.

During Hurricane Katrina, amateur radio volunteers played a key part in making sure that communications between agency personnel continued uninterrupted and that the public received the help and the timely



Incident Command Point



State Communication Vehicles

response needed in this type of catastrophic event. The Alabama Department of Homeland Security recognized this need, and chose to include amateur radio in this exercise.

Greg Sarratt, W4OZK, Southeastern Director for ARRL and Patti Link, KI4JEO, District Emergency Coordinator for Region 1, worked diligently, in conjunction with other amateur volunteers and alongside professional partner agencies, to help coordinate and facilitate the role of amateur radio during the exercise. Greg Sarratt acted as the liaison at the Incident Command Point to make sure all efforts were coordinated effectively with served personnel incident commanders, while Patti Link, working in the Baldwin County EOC, coordinated amateurs from Region 1, and beyond, for dispatch with Alabama DHS Regional Communication vehicles, as well as dispatch to other pertinent locations in the nine County affected area.

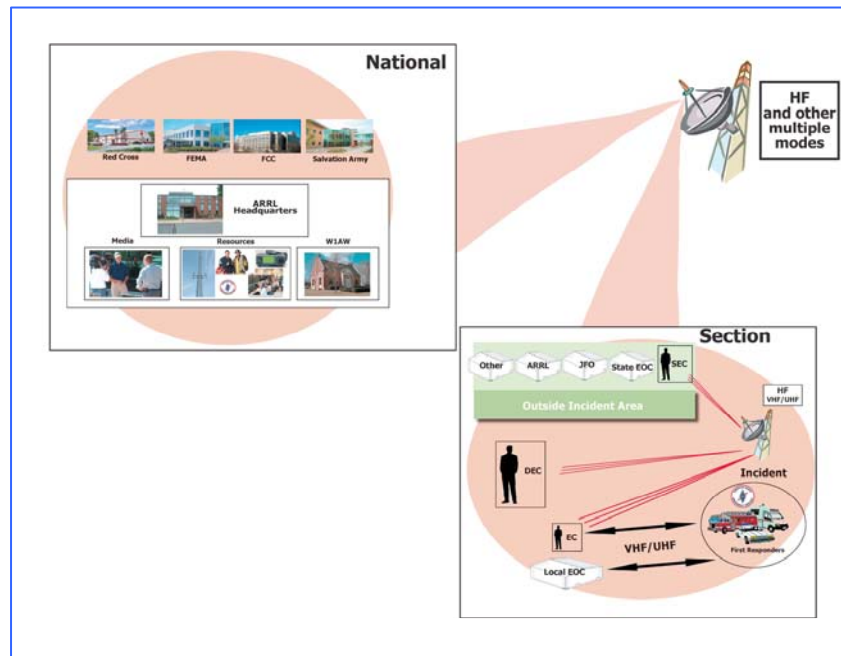


Alabama Regional Communication Vehicles with generator

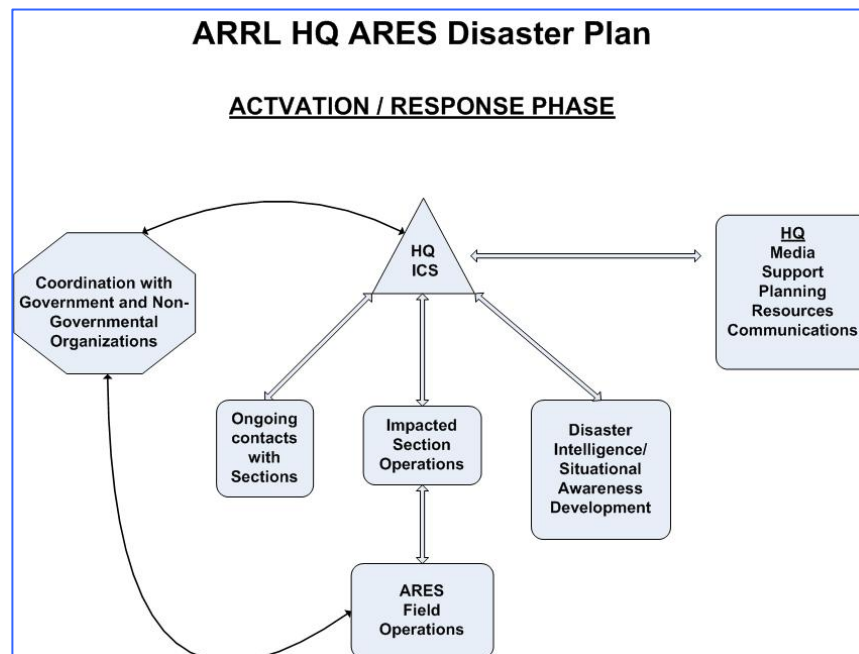
Alabama ARRL Section Manager, Jay Isbell KA4KUN was dispatched to a mock reception center site 60 miles north of the incident and Alabama ARRL Section Emergency Coordinator, Les Rayburn N1LF manned the radio at the State EOC.

Alabama District Emergency Coordinators, County Emergency Coordinators and hams across the state checked in on statewide HF and D-STAR nets and conducted local nets and scenarios in conjunction with the full-scale exercise in Region 1.

Dennis Dura K2DCD, ARRL's Emergency Preparedness and Response Manager, played a key role by holding down the fort at ARRL Headquarters and making sure that any and all resources were at the fingertips of the volunteers and agencies involved. Dura used a Major Disaster Emergency Coordinator (MDEC) and new ARRL procedures were tested between field, Section and ARRL Headquarters and they worked well. The hands on approach of the ARRL Emergency Preparedness and Response Manager gives the field much needed resources, short response time and added credibility.



National – Section ARES interaction



This was a typical full-scale exercise including rain, mud, two snakes, ants, bugs, heat, humidity and hundreds of people everywhere but we learned the importantly critical value of prior training and practice

for public service events. It is crucial to have the knowledge from the FEMA and ARRL EC training or we are basically in the Stone Age at today's incident site. We have to provide a unified front of quick, reliable and competent operators to be a valued useful partner today.

Several months of planning went into this exercise. AL DHS followed NIMS where amateur radio was an equal partner from the start. The Incident Command System including communications forms were used in the exercise. The detailed ARES Incident Action Plan can be viewed at, http://www.arri-al.org/ARES_AL_DHS_explan09.pdf and hotwash report at, <http://www.arri-al.org/ARES.html>

At the after action review no stone was left unturned for the entire exercise and the lessons learned for all players proved invaluable. The Alabama Department of Homeland Security Director, Jim Walker, finished the hotwash with an all inspiring and to the point speech.

The exercise proved to be a much-needed assessment of what works, and doesn't work, in Alabama emergency communications. Amateurs and state emergency personnel walked away with valuable information and tools to help further emergency communications effectiveness during the upcoming 2009 Hurricane Season, and in the future. There is still a lot of work to be done, but this exercise brought Alabama closer to better communications interoperability and new ideas and ways to be more successful in the future.

"As a person new to emergency communications, and an Extra Class Amateur Radio operator, this exercise was very informative and insightful. I really enjoyed learning about all that goes into creating interoperability between first responders and support personnel. It is a very exciting area that I am anxious to learn more about and become an active participant in. I didn't realize, until this exercise, exactly how large a part Amateur Radio plays in the safety of our State and of our citizens. It is inspiring to me to just be a part of such a worthwhile and valuable exercise and to work with so many great Amateur volunteers. There is still much to learn, but I look forward to the challenge."

Blanche Bearden, N4LUV

"While the simulated exercise provided valuable experience in a broad range of amateur radio modes and techniques, the most valuable lesson learned by all the operators was how vital a role amateur radio has in communications interoperability. The respect afforded each and every amateur operator is due in part to the long history amateur radio has of aiding and assisting our communities during times of local, regional, and national disasters." Patti Link, KI4JEO

"It was a great exercise and we learned a great deal during the week. This was a good test of the ARES processes and improvements since Katrina in a full-scale exercise with other agencies. Everyone shared and learned about each others communications capabilities. The relationships built and lessons learned here are invaluable to the Amateur Radio Service." Greg Sarratt, W4OZK

"Since the major hurricanes in recent years, The State of Alabama and the Southeast Region of FEMA have really accepted Amateur Radio as a prime player in any major disaster. Under the direction of Alabama Section Emergency Coordinator Les Rayburn, N1LF, Alabama ARES has grown from several independent groups helping their local EMA or Weather Service, into a well organized First Responder team. The state Emergency Management Agencies and other critical served agencies are helping with radios and training for local hams to step in and man critical emergency communications systems. Amateur Radio is being accepted as a critical tool during times that the daily manpower and technical resources are stretched beyond their design." Jay Isbell, KA4KUN Alabama Section Manager