Alabama ARES Simulated Emergency Test 2008

Overall status: Green

Overview

The 2008 Simulated Emergency Test centered on the most likely emergency that the section will face, that of severe weather. Each EC or EMCOMM Group leader was asked to come up with a scenario that focused on the threat of adverse weather. This allowed each region of the state to focus on exercises that best suited their needs. EC's responded with scenarios including hurricanes in the South, tornadoes and thunderstorms in the middle of the state, and flash flooding in the North.

For the first time, emergency communications groups, such as Skywarn, ALERT, Southern Baptist Disaster Relief and others were invited to participate and compete in the event. This opened up some exciting possibilities and more accurately reflected how EMCOMM in Alabama works in the "real world".

A unique scoring sheet was also suggested by DEC, Mike Watkins, WX4AL for this year's event. The scoring sheet allowed the Alabama Section to better determine progress towards goals in our state, such as the adoption of digital modes. After the event, scores were converted to match the ARRL standard, so that our groups could compare their efforts to that of others across the nation.

Internally, this exercise stressed operation from served agency Emergency Operations Centers (EOC's) such as those located at EMA offices, Red Cross shelters, etc. We also rewarded those who used digital modes to pass traffic rather than relying strictly on voice circuits.

Some of the score's posted around the state were impressive! In some counties, SET had to be delayed while ARES groups supported "real world" operational events including the NASCAR Talladega race, University of Alabama football game, and other events. Unfortunately, this also reduced their chances to compete on even footing with other counties, as HF and digital activity was much reduced on the alternate dates. Still they made the best of it, and turned in some great scores.

What was the secret to winning? By far, the keys to victory were having a large group of trained volunteers. Scoring favors those folks who have invested the time required to complete NIMS Phase I (FEMA) training, and taken at least one ARRL ARECC course. Being proficient in digital modes and traffic handling were also critical.

County or EMCOMM Group	EC	SET Date	AL Scoring	ARRL Scoring	Comments
Central AL Skywarn	Mark Wintersole, WB5NMZ	10/04/2008	232	209	Montgomery, Elmore, Butler, Lowndes, Autauga counties all participated with this group. Our 1st EMCOMM Group Winner!
ALERT	Mark Wells, WD4NYL	10/04/2008	186	197	K4NWS Liaison Group operating from NWS office in Calera, AL
Shelby County	Tom Appleby, KI4PPR/Hub Harvey, N4HUB	10/04/2008	373	264	Newly elected MEC, Tom Appleby provided great leadership for SCARC. Active on digital, 222mhz, D-Star, APRS, and more!
Lee County	Mike Watkins, WX4AL	10/04/2008	346	281	Out of 33 stations checking into this net, 32 of them are equipped for emergency power! 16 have completed NIMS Phase 1 and 8 have completed ARECC training. Great job!

Calhoun County	Randall Landers, KG4EUD	10/18/2008	285	213	Calhoun Co. couldn't make the original SET date due to supporting their EMA for the Talladega NASCAR race. That was good news for some of the bigger counties, because otherwise Calhoun might have beaten them all.
Blount County	Ken Moore, AB4WL	10/04/2008	225	253	BCARC participated in SET for the first time in many years and did an amazing job! Hats off to their new EC, Ken Moore & the entire club lead by Bill Ponds, AE4IEO.
Russell County	Jim Herring, WX4JIM	10/04/2008	224	171	Experience gained with using PSK-31 from the EMA Emergency Operations Center.
Tuscaloosa County	Eddie Lary, WS4I	10/02/2008 & 10/11/08	219	246	Despite being operational for the UA game, Tuscaloosa ARES still supported the state-wide set, and then held their own exercise later in the month!
Mobile County	Gerald Jones, KD4DLJ	12/06/2008	215	184	Team members were doing extended duty for Hurricane Ike in Texas during our October date, so they were delayed until late in the year. Despite the handicap, they still managed an impressive score. Thanks Gerald for your service during hurricane season, and year long efforts in ARES.
Lowndes County	Carole Edwards, WQ4V	10/04/2008	214	202	2 Newspapers and 2 websites covered this group's foray into PSK-31. Great leadership from this YL EC!
Lamar County	David Bash, KI4IKM	10/04/2008	195	145	A large number of local elected officials visited this SET, along with some great media exposure. Digital modes excited the group!
Madison County	Rolf Geodhart, K4RGG	10/11/2008	190	168	The award for the best designed exercise goes to Rolf. Madison County ARES incorporated recent training into a full scale flash flooding event, with a ton of coordination with their served agency and local first responders! Well done!
Cullman County	Daniel Hunt, W4GEL	10/04/2008	145	143	Great exercise centering on local VHF communications and cooperation with the served agency.
Covington County	John Brown, KE4HIE	10/18/2008	109	129	EC John Brown combined SET with a Boy Scout merit badge project/field day type event. This gave the general public a first-hand look at amateur radio emergency communications.

SEC Comments

SET 2008 marked a number of "firsts" for Alabama ARES. It was our first year with the new Emcomm Group category, and we were pleased with the results. Next year, we hope that even more disaster response organizations will join in the exercise.

Another new twist was the first wide-spread use of the D-Star digital network to pass both voice and slow speed data traffic during the exercise. As a long time user of D-Star, I really believe that the slow speed data capability is the most exciting development from an emergency communications viewpoint. Is your local EMA, or EOC equipped with a D-Star radio? If so, take the next step and purchase the appropriate cable to make it capable of doing slow speed data. Then download the free D-Rats software and begin incorporating this capability into your tool kit.

http://d-rats.danplanet.com/wiki/FrontPage

For the first time, we also held both a digital and voice HF net during the exercise, with Mike Watkins, WX4AL handling digital duties using PSK-31 on 3570khz. I cannot stress enough how important it is for every HF operator, EMA, and EOC in this state who is involved in ARES to add soundcard digital modes to their capabilities.

Our scoring reflected how much we value this ability, and we will continue to award those who embrace these techniques. The digital modes offer several advantages over voice communications on HF:

- The ability to accurately send and receive detailed messages quickly.
- Speed of transmission. A higher volume of traffic can be handled in less time.
- Accountability. With a local printer installed at the station, it's easy to keep detailed logs of message traffic, and to distribute the information within your EOC or served agency.
- Bandwidth. PSK-31 uses only slightly more bandwidth than a CW signal. Using free software like "Digipan", the net control station can copy multiple transmissions at the same time. Just move off frequency slightly and send away.
- Like CW, PSK-31 outperforms SSB voice in transmission range and readability. This is very important when many stations may be operating on 100 watts or less, emergency power, or with poor antennas.
- Some digital modes such as APRS Messaging, Winlink 2K, and D-Rats offer an emergency access to Internet e-mail. This can be vital both to your served agency and yourself. During Katrina, Winlink 2K was the only connection to e-mail for the Gulfport, MS EMA for several days. By all accounts, it did an amazing job.

Soundcard interfaces can be purchased inexpensively or easily constructed by most amateurs from scratch. Software is free or very inexpensive, and the learning curve for modes like PSK-31 is short. Every Emergency Coordinator should be on HF with PSK-31 capability, and any EMA or EOC equipped with an HF radio should have this capability as well.

Don't put it off…make it happen today. Our regular digital ARES net meets each Sunday on 3570khz USB and we start off with PSK-31, then move to RTTY. If you have questions, or need support, we can provide that as well.

Stepping off my soapbox, this was also the first year that the majority of Alabama counties had appointed EC's in many years. We have a long way to go with rebuilding the organizational structure, but we're making good progress. EC's continue to be appointed on a steady basis, and some of our best ones are also the newest.

Our newcomers did great jobs around the state, and posted highly competitive scores. I don't recommend "on the job" training, but it seems to be working for us. Hat's off to everyone who is new to their position and showing strong leadership.

We also operated from the State EMA in Clanton, KF4LQK, which is another first. This reflects our commitment to place amateur radio at the heart of our state's response to any widespread incidents or exercises. KF4LQK now has its own EC, Greg Gross, K4GR and Assistant Emergency Coordinator, Neil Taylor, N4ION. They are in the process of expanding the digital capabilities of the station, and improving our operating team.

During SET, Greg Gross operated using HF Voice, VHF/UHF analog, 222mhz liaison frequencies, D-Star voice and slow speed data, APRS Messaging, and also used the EMA's 800mhz (SouthernLinc) radios in some cases. We hope for KF4LQK to become a regular presence during both our weekly nets and exercises/incidents.

We're fortunate to have Fred Springall, KR4YK and Wes Martin, KI4VAE as our primary points of contact at the EMA. These dedicated professionals have heavily incorporated amateur radio into the state's overall communications plans. Look for even more participation at the State EMA in the coming months.

Overall, we had one of our most active SET's in recent years, and we can all be proud of the results. Well done!