

Field Day promises fun practice for emergency situations

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During an emergency situation such as a tornado or flood, it's important to be as prepared as possible for whatever may occur. This is especially true of the members of Northeast Mississippi Radio Amateurs, who typically find themselves as an important means of communication during such times.

But, to become prepared, the group has to practice. That's where their annual field day event comes into play. Scheduled for 24 hours on June 28-29 at the Itawamba County Welcome Center, the event will allow these radio enthusiasts to practice for emergency operations in a decidedly non-emergency situation . although not necessarily the most pleasant either.

"The exercise is all about preparing for emergency operations under less than normal or comfortable conditions," Jeff Clingan, a longtime NEMRA member explained. "I guess that's why the American Radio Relay League [ARRL] picks June for this event . as the heat makes it tough if you go outdoors like we will be doing this year."

According to Clingan, amateur operators hold field days to learn where they are best suited and least prepared for an emergency situation, should one arise. This drill allows them to practice for potential emergencies without having to wait for an actual emergency to work out any kinks their equipment or themselves may have.

"If you have trouble when you have plenty of time to set up, you may not be fully prepared to put your skills to the quickest possible use when called upon by your community officials," Clingan commented. "It's also a test of equipment. Operating for long periods of time under heat and humidity is rough on electronic equipment. Sometimes it decides to take a rest unexpectedly. What do you do then? Do you have a backup radio, antenna tuner or power supply handy? If not, you're off the air just when you may be needed the most. The exercise is all about fun, but it is serious training at the same time."

Hosted by the ARRL, the field day is actually a nationwide event that not only helps in emergency training but also promotes camaraderie among amateur radio operators from across the country and raises public awareness of the service they provide. With this in mind, the public is invited to attend the event and see just what it is that amateur radio operators do that could prove lifesaving. Although field day tests don't officially begin until 1 p.m., for operators the day begins much earlier with the set up period - usually three or four hours in advance of the actual testing. Clingan attested that since it is meant to precisely emulate the actions to be taken during an emergency situation, the set up phase is as important - if not more so - than the communications phase of the event.

"We will be using generators, batteries or other means for power just as we would have to do during an emergency," Clingan explained. "Antennas must be installed for different frequencies that we will be operating on. Most of these will be homemade from things like scrap electrical wire and plastic for insulators. Building antennas is an area of amateur radio in itself that many [amateur radio operators] really enjoy. The setup and preparation is usually as exciting as the contact time itself."

After setup, operators must maintain 24 hours of contact with different radio groups from across the country. According to Clingan, "Each contact consists of a short exchange giving the call sign being used, the state you are operating in and how many stations your group has on the air. Both stations give the information, receive confirmation and move on to the next contact."

It's an exciting time for the amateur radio operators - one that Clingan hopes other Itawambians will want to share, if only out of curiosity.

"Well, you should come by if you have an interest in radio communications or community service," Clingan said, adding with a smile, "or are just curious about folks who would get out on a hot summer day in Mississippi and, for 24 hours, burn up, fight bugs and cook out to talk on a radio with other people who are doing the same thing."

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