

KNW-154
IS AMATEUR RADIO BECOMING OBSOLETE FOR
EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS?

Article by David W. Thorne - K6SOJ; Sacramento Valley ARES

An article in the January 19, 2001, edition of "Amateur Radio Newline" said, "One of the reasons that hams are called out in emergencies could begin to disappear in 2006." The article referred to an FCC directive that spectrum be made available that will let disaster relief agencies communicate without the need of third parties. Public-safety agencies are already doing that by means of cellular and PCS telephones, Nextel, Multi-Use Radio Service (MURS) and Family Radio Service (FRS), and some frequencies set aside for mutual-aid communications. The new allocation at 700 MHz would greatly expand such interagency communications.

Radio amateurs must not be discouraged from continued participation in emergency communications. For example, many RACES organizations have shown that handheld SSTV equipment is ideal for on-scene video coverage. PACTOR, PSK31, and other new digital modes are ideal for statewide or interstate communications between agencies. Nevertheless, the need is for radio amateurs to consider themselves as part of a reserve communications organization, trained to provide communications on public-safety frequencies, not just amateur radio frequencies. When performing their services for emergency-management agencies, these reserve communicators are actually operating in the expanded Auxiliary Communications Service (ACS) concept, rather than in the restrictive RACES concept that ties them to amateur radio frequencies specified in the agency's RACES plan.

To be more specific about the FCC's directive, on January 11, 2001, the Commission adopted an interoperability standard to ensure effective public-safety communications between different agencies on designated channels in the 700-MHz band. "The Commission has long noted that the inability of different public-safety agencies to efficiently communicate with one another was a concern for the public-safety community."

The Commission adopted Project 25 Phase I as the voice standard for communications on the 700-MHz band interoperability channels, which are channels specifically, set aside to allow different public-safety entities to communicate with one another. The Commission also adopted the data standard incorporated in the Project 25 suite of standards for data communications on the 700-MHz band interoperability channels. These channels will allow public-safety entities, such as police and fire departments, to send status messages or short E-mails to one another.

Editor comment: If you see amateur radio EMCOMM only as hams running around with HT's providing tactical communications, then this new service could replace them. And, as long as emergencies and disasters occur only in fairly localized and geographically flat areas, without any mountains or tall buildings to block UHF signals, this new service should work just fine. And as long as satellites, cell phones, and linked repeater systems work as they are supposed to, and can handle 100 times the traffic they are designed for, skilled amateur operators probably will not be needed.

But, what about the non-government agencies we serve? Is the Red Cross, the Salvation Army,

and other private relief organizations going to have all these nifty toys...plus enough volunteers to operate them? Even if they do, will these operators be skilled observers and trained in traffic handling? And what about when the need for communications is beyond the horizon, and the telephone and e-mail lines are KA-PUT?

Anyone who has worked in any recent major disaster has learned that the cell and satellite communications systems (that are designed to handle an average normal-day traffic load) become jammed within the first five minutes. [Or I may add be shutdown for public safety reasons.] Who will handle the logistical traffic on behalf of both government, and non-government agencies, at ranges of from 12 to 12,000 miles? Who will handle Health and Welfare messages, local or “DX”, on behalf of the public and private non-profit “served agencies”? TRAINED, DISCIPLINED, ORGANIZED, AMATEUR RADIO OPERATORS using Packet, PAKTOR, PSK31, RTTY, SSB, and (yes)...CW ...that’s who!

The threat to amateur radio EMCOMM comes not from without. It comes from within! Apathy, lack of cooperation, or disgruntled hams who “don’t like the ARRL”, or: “don’t like the government”, or: “don’t like the Red Cross”, or: “don’t like this or that”, or any other of a long list of excuses in an attempt to justify non-participation and non-cooperation. Some even make fun of and/or interfere with organized amateur EMCOMM efforts.

Personally, I enjoy many different aspects of amateur radio. But, (in my opinion), those few hams (about 5-6%) who actively give back something to our community and country, are “the life blood” that is keeping our bands alive. K6SOJ

http://www.emcomm.org/svares/training/february_05_2001.htm