

Storm Spotters --

One of the more high profile amateur radio/served agency relationships is the one which exists with the National Weather Service.

While the Houston/Galveston National Weather Service office has all kinds of computerized products including their Doppler Radar to use when severe weather is threatening the area, on the ground real time information is a vital part of their severe weather event notification process. Even though all this high-tech equipment is useful, nothing else can replace a real time observer who is able to witness severe weather first-hand. They have come to rely on a cadre of trained spotters and public reports to verify what they see on the radar and to confirm the severe weather warnings that they issue.

In recent years, roughly 90% of the severe weather events for which warnings were issued, have had that warning issued prior to their occurrence! Their staff will continue to issue warnings with as much lead time as possible, and hopefully can improve their average. To achieve that objective means that they continue to need the public's help though.

These reports help them (and the public) out in many ways. They can check their radar algorithms to make sure what is really happening is what the radar really "sees". Every warning they issue is either verified by a severe event, or is not verified at all; either because no one reported it, the event took place in an unpopulated area, or it shouldn't have been issued in the first place. All of these statistics are reported to National Weather Service Headquarters. Another thing to keep in the back of your mind--if, for example, your roof sustained hail damage on a particular day and no one in your area reported it to the authorities, there is a good possibility that insurance companies might give you a hard time concerning replacement. Many times, insurance companies call their office to verify that a severe weather event happened on a certain day. If they have no reports, there is not much they can say but "no!".

So the question is -- How can you, the public help out? You should report a severe weather event as soon as possible. Although they are there 24 hours a day, they answer public calls Monday through Friday from 830 AM-430 PM. The public phone number is (281) 337-5074. You can also report the event to your local law enforcement agency; county sheriff or highway patrol office, who can reach them around the clock.

In addition, as a trained Skywarn volunteer, we have the ability to report by amateur radio on a 24/7 basis. Early each morning, the NWS local office Area Forecast Discussion give the probability of a severe weather event's prediction and the necessity for activation of any spotters. When a severe weather event occurs; the local skywarn repeater system is activated and more likely than not, one of the participating stations will be one of the NWS amateur radio operators on duty. Here in the Greater Houston-Galveston area that will be the Saltgrass Link System. So tune in, keep informed and stay alert.

An important issue is what to report and what not report. Some events can be considered significant to some, but strictly "by the book", are not considered severe. Calls, and reports of an event not considered severe are a waste of your time as well as theirs'.

Listed below are events to report and not to report.

This is a severe event (report it!)

1. Tornado on the ground.
2. A waterspout that moves onshore.
3. Measured wind gusts of 58 mph or more.
4. Large structures (trees, homes, power lines, permanent signs) sustaining wind damage. Be specific.
5. Dime size (3/4") or greater hail.
6. Flooding/flash flooding.

This is not a severe event (PLEASE DO NOT REPORT!)

1. "Strong winds" or
2. "tornado-like winds".
3. Lots of lightning or any lightning related event (including a fire).
4. "Very heavy rain".
5. Pea-sized hail.
6. "Power is out at my house".
7. "The sky is very dark".