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## Group rides air waves for hurricane season

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With hurricane season around the corner, local ham radio operators strive to make sure people in the Tomball and Magnolia areas are safe.

Ham radio operators use their equipment to communicate to emergency agencies when phone and power lines are down and use DX, or long-distance communication, to send messages to people across the globe.

Bob Mennell, member of the Texas DX Society and assistant director of the society's upcoming field day, said in emergency situations hams offer their services to fire departments, police departments, hospitals and the American Red Cross and do whatever is requested of them.

Amateur radio operator equipment is useful to the city of Tomball, Mennell said, because the city does not need to spend money on emergency equipment that local operators already own.

Randy Parr, fire chief for Tomball Volunteer Fire Department, said amateur radio operators have been brought in for training at the fire department, though they have not been put to use in an emergency yet.

Parr said following hurricanes Katrina and Rita, which caused billions of dollars in damage to the Gulf Coast in 2005, the fire department saw the need to enlist ham operators as a means of communication to the Houston area's emergency management system if phone lines and radio antennas are down.

Parr said the fire department is ready for the hams to operate as soon as an emergency hits.

"We e-mail each member of the emergency communication team and request that they come set up their system with their trailers," he said. "We already have a generator for them and already have the lines running in the building."

If the Houston area were to be warned of a storm today, he said, the hams would be alerted, they would connect to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and get all their equipment together to go into action. Some chase storms and others alert people of road accidents and food needs.

"It's not us overtaking police departments or fire departments," Mennell said. "We offer our service to them and work for them. We have no authority, that's not who we are, we are just here to help."

Parr said he believes ham radio operators are part of the great emergency program in place at the fire department, which also includes trained community emergency response teams and a group of retired engineers who create site plans and layouts for commercial buildings to allow the fire department to be better prepared if a commercial building were to catch on fire.

Ham radio operators get practice for emergency situations through courses they must take to be certified and through practice drills.

For example, a plane crash drill took place in Dallas and several hundred hams, hospital workers and "victims" were involved, Mennell said.

Hamming as a Hobby

Field Day 2008, sponsored by the American Amateur Radio League, is another chance for hams to practice their skills and make sure they



Bob Mennell, a Magnolia amateur radio operator, poses with some of the radio equipment set up in his "ham shack." On the wall to his left are cards that represent each of the people from 327 countries he has made contact with; he is only missing nine countries.

are prepared.

During Field Day, to be hosted at Spring Creek Park, 15012 Brown Rd. in Tomball June 27-29, local amateur radio operators will compete with some of the 665,000 licensed hams in the United States to see who can contact the most people in foreign countries and see who can bounce radio signals off the most unusual places, such as the moon.

The event will include barbecue and watermelons will be provided to anyone who takes the time to find out more about amateur radio.

Mennell, originally from Mississippi, got interested in amateur radio while growing up near a military base. The base had short wave radios, which he enjoyed listening to. Someone gave him a citizens band radio and, before the age of cellular phones, was able to communicate with someone across town.

Ever since that moment, he said, he has been hooked on amateur radio.

Amateur radio clubs, like the Texas DX Society, enjoy taking trips, "DXpeditions," to remote places around the world to see who can be contacted from where they are. Mennell said hams also enjoy exchanging cards similar to postcards with each foreign ham they communicate with.

Though many people may not understand why hams spend tens of thousands of dollars on a hobby, Mennell said to him, it is the same thing as those who golf for fun.

"This is climbing towers, pouring concrete, wiring trees," he said. "It takes a special kind of person to be a ham."



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