

Ham radio operators add to relief effort in storm-battered Oregon

Heavy rain, high winds knocked out power, phone service, Net access

By **Todd R. Weiss**

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Computerworld - Telephone lines, power lines, Internet access and cell-phone systems were no match for Mother Nature when three massive storms struck parts of Oregon in rapid succession this week. The storms lashed the region with 120-mph winds, heavy rains and flooding.

Even as modern technologies succumbed to the weather, the long-established, reliable ham radio network was able to fill the gaps and help state and county officials coordinate emergency response efforts and communicate with one another to assist distressed residents across the region.

In Oregon, about 200 volunteer ham radio operators have donated their time since last Sunday night to provide needed communications since the storms struck, said Vince Vanderhyde, emergency coordinator for the amateur radio volunteers who assist the Oregon Emergency Management Agency (OEM).

"I spoke to a woman who's been operating her radio in [the city of] Vernonia for 20 hours straight," Vanderhyde said. "Another guy volunteered to help communicate, then he said he was exhausted and was heading home to clean up his own house, which had been flooded with floodwaters. I have to tell you, it's the most dedicated bunch of citizen volunteers that you can imagine."

"When you get a license, there's an expectation from the [FCC](#) that you will take part in emergency communications," he said. "It's a 100-year-old tradition." The volunteer radio efforts in Oregon continue the long tradition of emergency assistance by ham radio operators. After Hurricane Katrina decimated parts of Louisiana, Alabama and Mississippi in September 2005, hundreds of volunteer radio operators [responded to help](#) the [American Red Cross](#) and other relief agencies.

Ham radio equipment starts at about \$600 and can go into the many thousands of dollars for radio sets and expensive antennas. All of those costs are borne by the volunteers, who can also use the hardware to communicate with people around the world. The radios can be powered by household electricity, batteries, vehicle electrical systems and even portable generators, allowing them to operate in various conditions. The radios enable communications using voice, Morse Code and even the ham radio equivalent of e-mail -- using computers

hooked into the radio systems with special modems, as well as a host of other methods.

Marty Mickillip, communications officer at the OEM, said the massive storms damaged trees that knocked down power and telephone lines, took out three critical fiber-optic cables, and disabled cell phone systems when power was lost. In some areas, power has still not been restored, he said.

"This is an unusual event," he said. "I think the last time we experienced this was in 1996." Flooding has caused several thousand people to evacuate to emergency shelters.

The number of communications established by the volunteers in Oregon this week is unknown,

but it's estimated to be in the thousands, said Dean Davis, the Marion County emergency coordinator for the 157,000-member American Radio Relay League Inc., a nationwide amateur radio organization in Newington, Conn.

"These people are out here with their own equipment that they paid for themselves, and they are passionate about their communities," Davis said. "You have an emergency like this, and some of these people really shine."

The efforts of the ham radio operators didn't escape the notice of Oregon Gov. Ted Kulongoski earlier this week.

"One of the problems in this is always communication," Kulongoski said during a visit Tuesday to Vernonia in an interview with Fox News television affiliate [Fox 12 KPTV](#) in Portland. "I'm going to tell you who the heroes were from the very beginning of this ... the ham radio operators. These people just came in and actually provided a tremendous communication link to us."

Kulongoski [declared a state of emergency](#) across parts of Oregon on Monday due to the storms and their aftermath.

