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Coastal Amateur Radio Society tests emergency readiness during Field Day

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About 40 members of the Coastal Amateur Radio Society took to the airwaves in force Saturday as part of American Radio Relay League Field Day.

From 2 p.m. Saturday until 2 p.m. today, ham radio hobbyists, or "hams" will continually man a handful of equipment stations set up inside the Southside Fire Station on White Bluff Road.

Using portable antennas, radios and laptops, the group will locate and contact as many hams as possible for a solid 24 hours. They'll also field contact inquiries from ham radio operators across the country who are also participating in Field Day.

The purpose of Field Day is to simulate emergency conditions and to find out if the hams' equipment and communication abilities are up to the task of disseminating information when other response teams can't.

For example, if a Category 5 hurricane hit Savannah and impeded police, fire department and medical emergency services, hams would use their battery-powered radios to relay information outside the affected area.

"When the infrastructure is down - electric, cell service, police and EMS - we're the only guys that can get on the air," CARS president Bill DeLoach said. "We're the first responders, really."

In a disaster situation, the fire station's permanent antenna may be rendered useless if struck by lightning or damaged by a downed tree. Several members arrived at 9 a.m. to put up portable antennas, just as they would in a real disaster situation.



Chatham County Commission Chairman Pete Liakakis looks-on as amateur radio operator Steve Jonas makes radio contacts during Saturday's annual Field Day operating event.
Richard Burkhart *Savannah Morning News News*



Members of the Coastal Amateur Radio Society used laptops and ham radios as they participated in the annual Field Day Operating Event to simulate emergency situations.
Richard Burkhart *Savannah Morning News*

Field Day also includes an element of competition. CARS and other clubs across the country are also competing for points, and the results will be published in ARRL's magazine. Points are accumulated in a variety of ways, including the number of contacts made in a 24-hour period and what states the contacts hail from.

Inside the fire station, Jere Connan continuously barked out call signs into his headphones and logged data into his laptop. So far, he's averaging about 33 contacts an hour. Not bad, but not ideal. CARS member Ralph Quinn said the Earth is at the bottom of an 11-year sunspot cycle, which can interfere with radio frequencies, even if the equipment is state-of-the-art.

Plus, there was a lot of traffic on the airwaves today, much like there would be during an emergency.

"On Field Day, we have to handle conditions where there's a lot of (hammers) on the air, and sometimes it's hard to hear," Connan said.

The equipment used in the exercise belongs to the operators themselves. The average ham spends about \$6,000 on the hobby. Extreme enthusiasts have been known to spend more than \$50,000 to nurture their passion, but secondhand gear can be found for as little as \$300.

Quinn is a big booster of amateur radio. He began "hamming" in 1992 and kept with it because he "always had a friend to talk to. And you get a darned good geography lesson."

For DeLoach, the lure of ham radio rests in its "mechanical, electrical magic."

"Imagine taking 100 watts of power, then, using the magic of radio, being able to talk to someone halfway around the world," he said. "It's amazing."

DeLoach first became interested in amateur radio as a teenager in the 1950s - "until I discovered cars and girls."

He returned to it more than 50 years later, when he joined CARS in 2002.

"I knew I would get back to it someday, but I didn't think it would take this long," he said.

DeLoach said he spends about two hours a day "hamming," but he predicts that number will go up dramatically when he retires from his sales job this week.

"I plan to be a stay-at-home dad for my dogs, do yard work and keep up with the wonderful hobby of ham radio," he said.