

Ham radio operators help out in fire crisis

By STACEY KENNELLY - Staff Intern

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OROVILLE — One of the local groups that has pitched in to help throughout the recent wildfires in Northern California is the Oroville Amateur Radio Society.

The group is composed of "ham" radio operators licensed to transmit at high frequencies, said president Larry Thompson.

Radios have been set up in the basement of the society's station, where unpaid amateurs communicate with the Red Cross, Salvation Army and other agencies to transmit information 24 hours a day.

Most society members belong to the American Radio Relay League, which was established by the federal government a "long, long time ago," Thompson said.

In World War II, people in occupied countries used amateur radios to communicate with the outside world.

"That's how the amateur-radio emergency thing started," he said. "Communicating on frequencies that nobody else would be on."

OARS uses many frequencies, and transmissions can be heard on hand-held scanners, Thompson said. This is convenient for people who have no power or electricity during times of crisis.

The frequency for the amateurs' broadcasts is above FM radio frequency and below frequencies used by police, firefighters and public works agencies.

High frequencies reach further distances, and the society's frequencies can reach across the world, Thompson said. This ability is useful when land obstacles — for instance, Table Mountain — prohibit transmission from reaching locations as close as 20 miles away.

OARS allows amateurs to use a frequency licensed by the Federal Communications Commission to talk with different people around the world. The term "amateur" was coined by the ARRL to describe unpaid people working in "hobby radio" who want to sign up for broadcasting shifts.

The society's station is used outside times of crisis by amateurs participating in ARRL-sponsored contests, where "contesters" make contacts all over the world, Thompson said.

"Some of these guys stay up for two or three days and haul equipment up to a mountain top so they can make a lot of contacts, like 1,000," he said.

Contests such as these provide amateurs with a solid database of contacts to use in times of emergency.

Some amateur's cars are equipped to broadcast from remote locations. Their knowledge of receiver-locations helps in times of crisis including the wildfires, Thompson said.

About 22 of the 40 OARS members have been involved with evacuations, shelter work and animal rescue, he said. Two or three people are in the

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station for four- to 24-hour shifts, but the society is trying to provide as much relief as possible.

Meanwhile, Thompson said OARS is upholding its underlying purpose: To be there when all else fails.

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