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Portsmouth Radio Club Crucial To Area Communication

by Majal Perry

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As the 7.0 magnitude earthquake rocked Haiti, ham radio operators were the first to report. When conventional means of communications fail, amateur radio often comes to the rescue. Unlike commercial systems, amateur radio is not necessarily dependent on terrestrial facilities that are prone to fail in disaster situations.

The Portsmouth Radio Club started in 1939 and became a charter member of the American Radio Relay League. With a mission to provide those having an interest in amateur radio a means of learning, cooperating, exchanging information, and communicating in various ways, the club serves as a valued asset to the local community. According to a statement on the club's Web site, "The PRC is prepared at all times to support local communities with emergency radio communications using all means available at our disposal. The club reaches out to Adams, Lawrence, Pike and Scioto counties."

Kim Carver, director of the Scioto County Emergency Management Agency, said, "Amateur radio operators have been the backbone of communication and disasters. They still today provide a secondary form of communication that backs up our primary communication, which is our everyday radio frequencies that we use. If we were to have a large enough disaster to take down communication towers, the amateur radio community has the knowledge and expertise to erect temporary communication towers to resume communication between responders and key facilities until we could get far enough along in the recovery phase to get our primary communications back up and running."

The Portsmouth Radio Club has aided local communities during disasters many times before, according to Carver.

"In the snowstorm of 1994, we were able to get communication links with staging areas where we were operating the National Guard out of, through the amateur radio community," Carver said. "They were able to keep the National Guard connected to where their missions were. In that event in '94 where we had 30 inches of snowfall and freezing temperatures for two weeks, amateur radio was the link between the emergency operations center and response between various townships. We actually had a ham operator riding in humvee units. These ham operators have a level of expertise and they have the equipment necessary to rig up just about any kind of communication tower. They can troubleshoot whatever the problem is and get radio communications back up and running in a pinch."

According to Carver, members of the PRC receive other kinds of special training.

"They are a part of our everyday planning and exercises here for emergencies," she said. "They have trained to do other duties for the Red Cross and other

organizations. They take an additional training to help in other areas aside from communications.”

Ceda Minturn, a member of the Portsmouth Radio Society, explained how the club is prepared to be first responders in the event of a local disaster.

“We keep an open line of communication when everything else is down,” Minturn said. “We can keep an open line to different places that can further assist in disaster. Usually, when there is a major disaster, the ham operators are the only ones able to get the message out. We have backup generators so that we are always ‘online,’ so to speak — when no one else is. We have helped during the floods. We’ve worked with Hazmat. During the ice storm, we were able to get communications out because we have a vehicle that we can get around in. We checked the roads and radioed conditions into proper departments.”

On Monday, Dec. 14, 2009, The Amateur Radio Emergency Communications Enhancement Act passed the Senate by unanimous consent. The bill now heads to the House of Representatives. The bill says, “There is a strong Federal interest in the effective performance of Amateur Radio Service stations, and that performance must be given- (A) support at all levels of government; and (B) protection against unreasonable regulation and impediments to the provision of the valuable communications provided by such stations.”

The bill comes on the heels of a series of large disaster-relief activities coordinated by ham radio operators when other systems failed. Recent examples include the Sept. 11 attacks on the World Trade Center in Manhattan in 2001, the 2003 North America Blackout, the earthquake and resulting tsunami of 2004 across the Indian Ocean, and Hurricane Katrina in 2005. In particular, Congressional hearings took notice of the ham radio response during Katrina. Over a thousand amateur radio operators from across the country converged on the Gulf Coast to provide communications assistance. The hearings highlighted that this response was one of the few examples of what went right in the disaster relief effort of Katrina.

The PRC has about 100 members, many of them lifetime. Meetings are at the Wheelersburg library the first Tuesday of every month. The repeater station for the club is N8QA, and is located at the Masonic Temple Building in Portsmouth. The PRC is in the process of relocating the station to a micro-wave tower in South Webster, to achieve even greater range. Repeater stations are specialty ham radio stations that extend the range of communications for other stations.

When disaster strikes, it is comforting to know that the Portsmouth Radio Club can provide a critical line of communication when infrastructure-dependent systems are blacked out.

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