

Much more than a hobby

Amateur radio operators prepare for a time when their help may be needed

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Photo By: Bethany MonroeARRL Field Day in Colton

Lonny Johnson of Colton uses his radio to chat with a fellow amateur radio operator in Forest Grove last Saturday during the American Radio Relay League Field Day he hosted at his property.

Around 100 people attended the Colton event to practice using radios for providing communications in the event of an emergency.

Amateur radio enthusiasts from all over Oregon and southwest Washington gathered in Colton last weekend for an ARRL Field Day, testing their radio equipment and practicing communications so they'll be ready if needed in an emergency.

The event, hosted by Lonny Johnson at his Colton property, was one of many nationwide gatherings of licensed amateur radio operators last weekend, facilitated by the American Radio Relay League, a national association for amateur radio.

"A field day is a day to practice using emergency power and get your radio going and set up antennas," said Ken Tolliver of Tigard, secretary of the Cascade Amateur Radio Society (CARS), which sponsored the Colton event. "You get some practice and also see how other people do it."

Besides enjoying amateur radio as a hobby, operators also prepare to put their skills to use in the event of an emergency. If the electricity goes out and cell phone and land line communication is lost, amateur radio operators are able to set up their antennas and send messages from their community for help.

"When all else fails, amateur radio works," said David Paulson of Tualatin, CARS president.

Johnson maintains a trailer outfitted with radio communications equipment and a portable, 40-foot antenna he built, ready to send messages if an earthquake or other disaster were to strike the local area. He also stocks a two-week supply of food on board.

"There are too many people that aren't ready," Johnson said. "You just need to be ready for whatever happens."

He said the South County Clackamas Amateur Radio Emergency Service, a local group of operators, plans to set up a base at Colton Fire District, where they could help communicate emergency calls if phone service is lost.

"To me, it's not a hobby, it's a calling," Johnson said.

Johnson, who served 21 years as a U.S. Coast Guard radio operator, said he was initially skeptical of amateur radio and its value.

"I looked down my nose at them when I first heard about them," he said.

But when Johnson learned that much of the technology used by professional radio operators was actually developed by amateurs, his interest was sparked.

"The amateur radio operators — they're a lot of experimenters," Tolliver said. "They try a lot of new things. A lot of times we'll try a new application and it turns commercial."

Many of the attendees at the Colton event are members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS). There are about 1,300 LDS amateur radio operators in the Portland region, Tolliver said.

"The church is very adamant about preparedness in the event of an emergency," Paulson said.

The LDS Church maintains a Bishops' Storehouse in Portland stocked with food, clothing and other supplies, ready to be sent out by the truckload if disaster strikes a community. They also have a network of amateur radio operators, ready to pass along information all the way up to their main headquarters in Salt Lake City, if needed.

Even before Hurricane Katrina hit land, Paulson said multiple semi trucks from storehouses in Salt Lake City and elsewhere filled with supplies were already heading to New Orleans.

"A thing about the church is we care for our own and whoever is around us — our neighbors," Paulson said. "It's just an opportunity to serve."

Over the weekend, amateur radio operators in Colton managed to make contact with other operators all over the nation and even internationally, including Poland and Hungary. If conditions are right, it's even possible to communicate via radio with the International Space Station, Johnson said.

"We have more people licensed now than we ever have in the U.S.," said Jim Fenstermaker, Northwestern Division Director for ARRL. "This is a real fraternity of people with a like interest."

Amateur operators are required to have a license and many clubs can help new operators get the training they need. Johnson said there are several youth amateur radio operators in the local area, including a 9-year-old. And while Johnson's military background made him fluent in Morse code, it's no longer a required skill for receiving a radio license.

Still, Paulson said many retired military members are active amateur radio operators and enjoy the opportunity to connect with others around the nation who have similar interests.

"A lot of these old operators are war veterans — for them it is lifeblood," Paulson said. "It's someone to talk to."

For others, amateur radio can become a competitive sport — racing to see who can make the most connections in a limited amount of time.

The Colton ARRL event drew about 100 people, with many camping overnight. Boys Scouts also participated, working toward earning merit badges for emergency preparedness and radio.

Besides radio communications, the event also included flying radio controlled planes, rifle shooting and a Civil War history demonstration — including firing off a scale model cannon and other activities.

For more information on amateur radio, visit www.qrz.com.

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