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Puget Sound ham-radio enthusiasts test their hobby's emergency powers

By Kyung M. Song
Seattle Times staff reporter

In a world where you can make a mobile call from Mount Everest and log on to the Internet from a polar-ice floe, you might expect ham radios to have long been consigned to the technological dustbin.

But amateur radio endures, nourished by enthusiasts and sustained by its ability to transmit critical information even after the power supply goes out, cellphone towers get jammed and television and radio fall silent.

On Saturday, Puget Sound-area amateur radio buffs, or "hams," joined thousands of others across the nation in an annual two-day exercise to test their emergency capabilities.

Local hams erected temporary stations all over the region, including at Farrel-McWhirter Park in Redmond and the campus of South Seattle Community College.

The annual field day is organized by the National Association for Amateur Radio.

Joe Oates, a Microsoft data warehouse program manager who got hooked on ham radio 35 years ago, calls the technology an emergency communication tool of last resort.

Disasters such as massive blackouts or hurricanes can leave thousands of people without access to television, computers or telephones. Hospitals and other essential services have generators for backup power, but those can run out if the outage is prolonged.

In contrast, a cellphone-sized ham radio can reach other ham operators within a 40-mile radius with just a couple



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JD Wallace with MicroHAMS uses a homemade potato gun to fire into the trees. Attached to the potato is a line to pull up an antenna for this weekend's event.



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Michael Hlavaty-LaPosa helps to get an antenna in place in Farrel-McWhirter Park in Redmond. The higher the

of AA batteries, Oates said.

"Five watts. That's less than a flashlight," he said.

At Farrel-McWhirter Park, power cords and cables snaked through the grass to half a dozen tents and even a couple of RVs. Some of the mobile stations sat beneath crisscrossed wire antennae shot into treetops with a bow and arrow or a giant potato gun.

The RVs belong to the city of Redmond, which is among the municipalities that incorporate volunteer ham radio operators into their disaster-response plans.

Ham-radio operators must pass a test to obtain a license from the Federal Communications Commission.

Depending on the strength of their antenna, they can talk to other hams anywhere in the world. Though ham radio uses simple technology, fancier setups also can transmit Morse code and digital data, including live video.

A French speaker, Oates has conversed with other hams in Quebec, France and the Caribbean in their native tongue.

Such serendipitous connections are a major part of the allure of amateur radio, said Noah Coad, a Microsoft program manager and a member of MicroHAMS, a group composed of, yes, Microsofties who dig amateur radio.

Coad, 30, relocated from Houston five years ago. New to Seattle, the Texas native simply turned his ham radio on and sent out his call sign, N5XI. He found an instant social circle.

"I can talk to hundreds of people at once" with ham radio, Coad said.

Oates, who also belongs to MicroHAMS, said few activities mix utility and fun like amateur radio.

"It's a hobby. And it's a public service," he said. "When all else fails, ham radio comes through."

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antenna, the better the signal.



ALAN BERNER / THE SEATTLE TIMES
Kevin Natale with the Redmond Amateur Radio Emergency Service points to where the potato should be fired. After a few tries that did not work, Natale suggested, "Maybe we should try a rock in a sock." They stuck with the spuds.