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Gary Bagholz of Brown Deer participates in Fields Days of the Ozaukee Radio Club, a test of the ham radio operators' abilities to set up and operate in the field under emergency conditions such as power failures. The event was held at Lazy Days campground near West Bend. Bagholz has been a member for 10 years.

Ham radio users step in for safety

Field Day event tests ability to rally during community emergency

By **JIM CRYNS**
Special to the Journal Sentinel

Not everyone has a hobby that also saves lives, but that's what draws members of the Ozaukee Radio Club and hundreds of thousands of fellow radio operators around the world out for event like last weekend's Field Day.

Held at the Lazy Days campground near West Bend, members of the Ozaukee Radio Club honed their emergency preparedness and communications skills.

They hoisted antennas and sent out their call signs in hopes of reaching other operators doing the same.

To alleviate any confusion, ham is not an acronym. The theories of origin of the term are almost as numerous as the 700,000 operators nationwide.

Much like a boxer, when ham operators aren't in the "ring," they are busy training — and that's the reason for the Field Day.

Ham operators have become skilled in sending vitally needed information to facilities such as the National Weather Service during severe weather incidents.

They've been trained to communicate with police, firefighters and other first responders who do not use ham radio conventions during their normal work day.

"It is a hobby in the sense that all radio amateurs are strictly hobbyists since they can't charge for their service," says Stan Kaplan, the Wisconsin section emergency coordinator.

"It's also a vital service whenever there is an emergency. Throughout modern history, whenever there has been any kind of a disaster, it's always the ham operators that are first with communications in a particular area."

Ham radio operators work for the Wisconsin Emergency Management, Kaplan said.

"We supply emergency information to governmental infrastructure. It's purely volun-

tary, we cannot be paid as that would be against federal law. Society at large doesn't even know about us. The guy on the street wouldn't have any idea."

Kaplan says since Sept. 11, he's witnessed an attempt to incorporate volunteers into public safety. "We're seeing a rapid transition now," Kaplan said, "more acceptability of hams. "That's because police, fire departments, EMS, realize that in big disasters, they can't do it by themselves, there's just not enough equipment or manpower."

Leon Rediske is the vice president of the Ozaukee Radio Club and obtained his ham license almost 50 years ago.

"Once a month we have training for all sorts of potential accidents," Rediske said. "We train for gas leaks, hazardous materials, we train on rescue boats."

Rediske says some ham operators are trained as weather spotters.

"In the field, they will look for heavy rain, winds, funnel clouds," Rediske said. "They will report that information to a ham operator who works with the National Weather Service in Sullivan."

The ubiquitous web of radio security goes beyond dry land.

Jon Gilmore is the emergency coordinator for the Ozaukee Amateur Radio Emergency Service.

"When you call the Coast

Guard, guess who responds," Gilmore asks? "A bunch of us hams that are out there on the rescue boats. A lot of the captains and crews on Coast Guard ships are ham operators. There are ham operators everywhere."

Gilmore says his emergency service has agreements with the American Red Cross and the Salvation Army.

"If there is a disaster, we'll be there. All the communications surrounding 9-11 were hams," Gilmore said. "All other forms of communication were out."

"If the communications goes down at St. Mary's Hospital in Ozaukee County, we've been trained to go in," Gilmore said. "We have an antenna there. We have direct communications with the Flight For Life. We can communicate with any emergency service."

"It varies how law enforcement perceives us," Kaplan said. "In Ozaukee County, they view us as an arm of emergency management. We are attached permanently to emergency management by common consent. We've had a good working relationship."

Kaplan says the ham radio operators aren't making the decisions at disaster sites, it's the law enforcement, or the shelter manager that dictates procedures.

"Hams are mostly conduits of information," Kaplan said.

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