

# Emergency Communications Do's and Don'ts

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*Since we are in the midst of the hurricane season, it is an excellent time to consider operating procedures for emergency communications.*

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My long time friend Pete Kemp, KZ1Z, is a lucky stiff. When Pete taught middle school here in Connecticut, one of his students was actress-to-be [Meg Ryan](#). At the ripe old age of 50-something, he retired and moved to Florida. When Hurricane Charley took aim at his new home, it changed direction at the last minute and just grazed KZ1Z's ham shack.

Lucky Pete contributed his words of wisdom [here before](#) and now he has some new words to share with you related to emergency communications.

If you are going to be part of the solution, not just part of the problem, you must pre-plan. Ops are constantly reminded to have emergency telephone numbers and frequencies available for instant use, as well as a "Go Kit" containing appropriate items. Don't forget the reference materials, such as repeater lists, net frequencies and maps, as they are essential for any ham radio operator.

Contrary to the doomsday thinking, the Internet *is* a source of information. I did not say *primary*, just a resource. Many organizations have pages for the intake of health and welfare messages. Use them, if available. Anything to unclog the system is a benefit, not an adversary. Many active hams, who are ARRL members, may take advantage of the ARRL forwarding service. A blind message to a **call\_sign@arrl.net** may sometimes yield results. Not a great way, but creativity in an emergency is important.

I am totally amazed by the misinformation and cloudy thinking demonstrated by some operators on HF nets. The basics are simple; information coming out of the area is the highest priority. When asking for check-ins, don't disregard those ops in the area with non-traditional call signs. Florida, for example, has many ops, who are not 4s, but reside there permanently on snowbird status.

Most well run TV, radio stations and newspapers have an Internet presence. Whether they are inside or outside of the disaster area, use them first. Many are full-service sites,

which include streaming video. A picture can get across information much more quickly than audio alone. If you want to help, keep quiet, get a map and take notes on what is happening.

Follow the directions of net control. Words that denote emergency high priority traffic, such as break, should rarely be used unless you are sure that such an interruption meets proper criteria. It is unbelievable how many really dumb questions are asked. For example, an op breaks the frequency using improper procedure with a tone of voice indicating a major problem or emergency. He/she then gets the frequency and says, in a slow plodding manner, "I used to have a friend in town 'X.' I haven't seen him in years and am worried." Wake up! All this is a waste of valuable time, when town "X" is hundreds of miles away from the disaster area. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to look at a map or do a little research on your own *before* flipping the transmit switch. The basic rule of life applies to many situations ... when in doubt, don't. This will free up the frequency for real questions.

Know the type of net you are on. Most often, tactical information, health and welfare and other nets are specialized. Checking into an information net wanting to pass a National Traffic System (NTS) message to someone slows down the process.

Net Control Stations (NCS) are so important to smooth the flow of information. Their contributions can make or break a net. Good NCSs represent the highest degree of organizational ability and operating skills at every level. Some items to remember, stay calm, never transmit undue emotion in the tone your voice. If you get overly excited, then this feeling is transmitted to others, both on the net and to SWLs who may be monitoring, making them anxious.

Speak clearly and make sure your directions are just that, directions. Have authority in your voice, not as a drill instructor in boot camp, but as one who demonstrates being in command of the situation. Giving unclear instructions confuse the stations being addressed. Save all your notes and logs, as they may be important for documentation later on.

NCSs on HF should take more advantage of sending stations off frequency to pass information and then return. This frees up the primary frequency for more traffic handling. So, learn how to use your A and B or external VFO.

Take a moment to share information at regular intervals with the net. Weather updates or situation reports of general interest from affected areas or net housekeeping chores are acceptable. This will prevent many net interruptions repeating the same information. NCSs may also use this time to locate a secondary NCS or identify a relay station that may have a better copy for operators in areas wanting to participate who can't hear or be heard by the NCS.

Allow ample opportunity for check-ins. People get anxious when they arrive at a net with traffic and they have to wait a long time to be recognized. You can run 1000 Watts, but if

you don't have propagation, you are about as good as two tin cans and a string. Don't get swellheaded. You may like to hear yourself talk, but others don't. NCSs need not develop a superiority complex; it turns people off. Heaven knows no one is perfect, but if an NCS does something you feel is inappropriate, button your lip and address the issue later. Arguments on the air are unwanted, as they do nothing to enhance the net's mission. This behavior can only be a distraction to the operation.

If you can expedite traffic, you are directly in an area, and the person wanting the traffic is 300 miles away, then it *may*, note *may*, be appropriate to break. Use common sense. If it is a high priority, flash-type message, then break to offer assistance. If the message is of lower priority and the other station has access, then you do well to just let it pass and go with the flow. You may have a piece of traffic next on the list.

[EchoLink](#) and [IRLP](#) are terrific adjuncts to Amateur Radio, especially during times of poor propagation. Many want to listen in on the activities in disaster areas, so depending on the station being linked to, use restraint. Listen, if you want, but do not transmit. The constant interruptions to a net do not override your personal desire to listen to the action. Relays popping in and out, delayed link interaction and such slows things down to a crawl. In some cases, repeater trustees and control ops have had to shut off links, as it was too cumbersome, interfering with the rhythm of the net.

Don't overlook contacting an individual operator via this mode. You need not link directly to a net via a repeater. Know your geography and use a call sign directory or lookup source if in doubt. You just may get the information you need or desire to pass more quickly if the EchoLink or IRLP station on the other end has local access to communication resources.

Amateur Radio operators value their ability to operate in adverse conditions. They have a combination of skills that can be of value to the community. This value can multiply when common sense and proper procedures are followed.

For more information on Amateur Radio crisis operations, go to the ARRL's [Emergency Communications Web page](#) and the ARRL's on-line [Public Service Communications Manual](#).

Until next week, keep on surfen'

**Editor's note:** Stan Horzepa, WA1LOU, feels left out and believes that every other year, the hurricane name list should go backwards, i.e., starting with Z and ending with A. Then, there would be a chance for Hurricane Stan! To discuss hurricanes, names, surfing and other important and neat stuff with Stan, send him e-mail at [wa1lou@arrl.net](mailto:wa1lou@arrl.net).

The ARRL's on-line [Public Service Communications Manual](#) is an excellent source for learning how to do the right thing on the air during an emergency.