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LOCAL NEWS

When disaster strikes, hams are on the air

Minutes after the May 2 earthquake sent shock waves through the Sky Valley, normal lines of communication began to fail. The 911 system jammed and even police radio systems became unreliable as their frequencies were relegated for emergency use.

Yet within minutes after the disaster, a system for relaying information to the Snohomish County Emergency Management office had already been set in motion.

The information was dispatched from ham radio operators who were on the air waves reporting conditions on downed phone lines, power outages, and damages in the area.

"Right off the bat we had a pretty good overall view of how the area was affected; we could see that Monroe and Duvall were the hardest hit," said Steve Wheeler, who heads up RACES, Radio Amateur Civil Emergency Service, for the county's emergency management program.

Wheeler said RACES, with about 200 members county-wide, has been in operation since the 1950's, but "the program got reborn back in 1992. We grew from just a handful of operators to 205," said Wheeler.

"Ham operators have a long history of providing necessary communication links in times of disaster or other emergency," said David Axe, a member of RACES and vice president of the Sky Valley Ham Radio Operators club. "When we're needed, we come out of the woodwork and help."

The Sky Valley club, with membership reaching from the city of Snohomish to Skykomish, "is in a unique position to help the valley, because we're spread out over a large area," said Axe.

Recently, the club was presented with \$500 from the city of Sultan to help establish emergency stations at



Photo by Sally Pool Gillie/Monitor

Students take licensing exams at the January meeting of the Sky Valley Ham Radio Operators in Sultan. Front row, Robby Hicks, 15, Lloyd Hensrude, 13 and Jessie Jamsgard, 10 answer questions on the timed exam. In back, left to right, Sky Valley Ham Radio Operators Bill Trippett, David Axe, club vice president, and Ernie Allsop, president.

the fire station and city hall.

"The money is greatly appreciated," said Ernie Allsop, club president. He said much of the funds would go toward outfitting a repeater antenna, "which will facilitate our emergency work up here. We look forward to working with police and fire units to help out the next time there's an emergency."

The club has also installed two dual band antennae on top of the fire station and city hall. In case of a disaster, radio operators will tune in to a predetermined frequency and begin the task of assembling information which can be relayed to the proper authorities.

The Sky Valley Ham Radio Opera-

tors club, which meets at 8 a.m. on the third Saturday of every month at the Dutch Cup restaurant, has a membership of about 45 radio operators, including several students.

Jessie Jamsgard, 10, a third grader, has been interested in radios for several years. Her parents, Rick and Theresa, are both hams. "One of the fun things we do is play with morse code," said Rick. "I have a set in my car, and on the way home from work I'll call in messages for her to decipher." Knowledge of morse code is necessary for radio operators to receive advanced licenses.

Jessie, who belongs to a students radio club at Emerson Elementary School taught by third grade teacher

Gary Evans. Last fall, Evans and his class communicated with an astronaut on the Mears space station for 15 minutes.

At the club's January meeting, Jessie was one of three students taking operator tests. Lloyd Hensrude, 13, and Robby Hicks, 15, both have novice licenses and were taking their tech no code test. Hensrude said ham radios were something he thought about doing for a while. "The I called Radio Shack, and got started," he said.

Robby Hicks, 15, said he began being interested in radios listening to the police scanner. "I just enjoy working with radio. This is something I want to keep doing."