

Amateur radio operators assist in Ike recovery



FEMA representatives Cynthia Taylor and Marty Bahamonde, center, meet with local radio operator Joe Gadus to discuss relief supplies for Hurricane Ike.

By **OBSERVER STAFF REPORTS**

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Hurricane Ike devastated southeast Texas. More than two million people lost their power, thousands lost their homes and damage was unlike anything people have seen in decades. Local amateur radio operators responded to the needs of their communities.

Communications networks were established to provide health and welfare messaging, and assistance was provided to the Salvation Army, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Harris County Office of Emergency Management and the Disaster Housing Assistance Program.

Amateur radio operators were quick to respond locally. Members of the Amateur Radio Emergency Service immediately set up a communications network to assist the Community Response Task Force. The CRTF is a coalition of governmental entities, private businesses, faith-based organizations and nonprofit groups who have banded together to serve northeast Harris and East Montgomery counties.

Operators manned stations for the city of Humble, city of Houston, Atascocita Volunteer Fire Department, Memorial Hermann Northeast and Kingwood hospitals, and the Harris County Office of Emergency Management. They assisted in damage assessment reports to county officials by using voice and digital communications. When many lost phone and Internet service, these amateur stations continued to operate by sending e-mails via their amateur radios, using a program called Airmail.

After the storm passed and the recovery phase started, these amateurs manned most of the 26 points of distribution in Harris County. They communicated with the FEMA supply base and Harris County officials to order supplies of water, ice and meals.

Amateur radio operators worked with representatives of the Army Corps of Engineers, the National Guard and the Disaster Housing Assistance Administration. Many of these operators are veterans of the Hurricane Katrina relief effort in 2005.

The Northeast Unit of ARES is led by Kingwood resident Chuck Sprick (call sign KE5RAD). He coordinated amateurs from Kingwood, Humble, Huffman, Atascocita, Porter and Roman Forest to provide an effective network of communications.

“Amateur radio is a hobby, but ARES is a commitment,” said Sprick. “Hurricanes like Ike are what we train for, prepare for and respond to.”

These amateur radio operators practice their skills throughout the year. Most have completed training with the Community Emergency Response Team program and have completed a number of incident management courses offered by FEMA. These dedicated members believe in their slogan, “When all else fails, amateur radio works.”

To learn more about amateur radio, go to the American Radio Relay League website at www.arrl.org or the District 14 ARES website at www.harriscountyares.org.

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