

Skywarn Relationships

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One point must be made very clear right at the beginning: SKYWARN SPOTTERS AND SPOTTER NET CONTROL STATIONS ARE NEVER RESPONSIBLE FOR ISSUING WEATHER WATCHES, WARNINGS OR OTHER WEATHER RELATED ANNOUNCEMENTS TO THE PUBLIC, PUBLIC SERVICE AGENCIES, OR TO THE MEDIA. This is the responsibility of the NWS only.

National Weather Service offices request that amateur radio spotter nets be activated in several different ways. Some offices request spotter activation with announcements included in their Public Weather Watch or Warning broadcasts. Some offices prefer to use a group of radio or telephone "calling trees." Still others, (probably the vast majority), prefer a very simple, "automatic" system; whereby spotter activation is automatically triggered throughout a coverage area by an NWS announcement of a watch or warning anywhere in that coverage area. A combination of these methods, in whole or in part, is not uncommon at all.

Regardless of what system is used, a formal agreement, known as a Memorandum Of Understanding (MOU), should be in place between at least the District and the NWS. County level MOU's are very useful to cover special needs in fringe areas. This agreement should describe, in detail, exactly what the notification system will be; and the response activities that the amateurs radio spotters will perform at each level of the watch/warning. The MOU should be freely copied and distributed. All amateurs within the coverage area should be informed regarding the content of MOU's. It is absolutely essential that all Net Control operators be aware of, and fully familiar with, the Skywarn activation process for their area.

Some NWS offices are very particular about the use of "SKYWARN" as a description of weather net. It is recommended that the word "Skywarn" not be used in any standby net called by an EC or others. Once a request for activation has been formally received, or publicly broadcast by the NWS, it is usually understood that the word "Skywarn" is OK to use. This issue should be covered in the MOU.

If a request for a weather net is received from a local government authority instead of the NWS, (this is fairly rare), the request of the government authority supersedes NWS authority. The net normally transfers at this point, to come under RACES/FEMA authority. The NWS should be notified if this should occur. Spotter reports of significance would still be sent to the NWS. The NWS still retains the exclusive authority to issue all watches and warnings; but a County Emergency Manager, for example, can override the NWS on a local level and sound warning sirens, etc. at his/her discretion.

A basic misunderstanding frequently occurs in new ARES/RACES groups. You do not have to wait for a NWS public watch or warning statement to be issued before you start a weather net! If the weather is presenting a local threat that is making a number of you nervous, start a standby weather net! Don't call it a SKYWARN net. Don't issue any watches or warnings on your own. Just announce that a standby weather net is in progress and that you are beginning to track conditions.

Regardless of whether a net is directed and formal or an informal standby net, only one person should be responsible for reporting conditions to the NWS. The NWS frowns on multiple, identical reports. Multiple reports make our efforts look totally disorganized.

Standby nets can be a very informal information gathering process that will help immensely if, and when, the NWS issues a watch or warning. If conditions really get nasty, formalize the net and notify the NWS that you have a net in progress; and why. The NWS should never complain about this activity; indeed, they should be grateful; and they have no

right to complain. Your right to communicate and have nets for the benefit of the public is under FCC jurisdiction and authority, not NWS authority.

Standby nets are generally run under condition "Green". This is the lowest weather priority. Condition "Green" is also used during a thunderstorm Watch. When an official Watch is issued for a particular locale, nets covering a location experiencing adverse weather effects can go to condition "Yellow" and begin using the word "SKYWARN" as a descriptor. When an official Warning is issued, nets usually go to condition "Red."

Local NCS's may upgrade/downgrade a condition code on their own; in accordance with local conditions and for the safety awareness of their Spotters. NCS operators should be very careful to phrase an upgrade/downgrade statement to the net; so that it doesn't represent, or sound like, an official public Watch or Warning statement. A simple statement such as: "This net is now changing to condition Yellow alert and safety status.", will suffice.

The NWS does not have to activate their in-house amateur radio station just because you have started a stand-by weather net. Ask them if they are going to activate it. If they say "No", thank them for the information and use the telephone for any further communications. Never underestimate or overlook the value of a working telephone.

The NWS recognizes that their radar has severe limitations and that with their current radar technology, they will never be able to see what is happening at the all important lower elevations between zero and 4000 feet for more than just a few miles. Only a spotter can actually observe and report the effects of hail, wind velocity, gust fronts, funnel clouds, wall clouds, downburst activity, rotation, and tornadoes. The NWS radar can't actually see any of these things. Their radar can only indicate a relative location of conditions at higher elevations that are known to be conducive to these things occurring at lower elevations.

The spotter becomes increasingly more important to the NWS and the public as the distance from the radar site increases. Even at minimal radar take-off angles, at a distance of 40 to 100 miles, the radar image may be well above any, or most, significant ground effect storm activity. This is one major reason that a NCS must keep track of all spotter locations. Knowing a spotter's exact location helps the NWS know where to look for developing patterns.