

## Responding to Skywarn Activations

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Skywarn Net participation is serious business, and we must perform certain tasks to ensure that the operation runs smoothly and only necessary information is brought to the net. For those of you new to amateur radio, and/or Skywarn this will help you understand what is going on during the net. For you old timers, this will be a good refresher and additional information of how we are changing our operation.

### Checking into the Net:

When checking into a Skywarn Net, the NCS only needs the following information: Your callsign, location, and whether you have severe weather at your location. If you do not have severe weather at your location, simply state "Nothing to report." Here is an example:

*This is KD4PWL, Richmond Road and New Circle nothing to report.* This gives the NCS all the information he or she needs, let's them know you have no severe weather at your location, and that you know not to transmit when you shouldn't.

### What to report, and what NOT to report:

The mission of Skywarn is to take reports of severe weather to the NWS so they can warn the public. If the weather phenomena is not severe, the NWS do not need or want the information, and will not act upon it if they receive it. The same applies to the NCS of the Skywarn Net.

With such a clearly defined mission, reporting any other information is not necessary, and ties up the frequency. The only rule in any formal Skywarn net to only pass severe weather information or emergency traffic.

During a formal Skywarn Net it is important to only transmit what is necessary, and in the briefest manner possible. There may be many other operators needing to report emergency traffic. Transmit only if you have a report of any of the following:

- Tornado
- Funnel Cloud
- Wall Cloud with or without rotation (usually only reports of rotation will be taken to the NWS, however the Skywarn NCS needs to know about any wall cloud.)
- Winds above 55 miles per hour. Refer to the Field Spotter Quick Reference Page
- Hail dime (3/4 inch) or above
- Flash or urban flooding. This does not include large amounts of water running in ditches, slight to moderate ponding of water on the roadways unless it poses a serious traffic accident hazard. If the water is collecting a little in a low spot in a field, that is also ponding.
- True emergency situations such as an injury accident, fire, serious personal injury, or any situation involving serious threat of injury or death, or serious felony crime.
- Severe Damage not previous reported.
- Gray Areas: There are many other important incidents that may occur that may or may not need to be brought to the net. If the net is very busy, and you have doubt, wait until the emergency traffic slows down before transmitting. (Example: There is a non injury accident while someone is reporting a tornado. Clearly, the information regarding the tornado is much more important.) However, if the net is slow, and little information is being passed. Ask the NCS if they can take a non-emergency report. Use discretion on incidents like this.

### What not to report, and how to prevent those types of reports:

Frequently, there are operators who are not familiar with the Skywarn program, or have not participated in many emergency nets that check into a Skywarn Net. These operators have the best of intentions, and try very hard to help. However, if they have very little knowledge of the operating procedures, they often report too much, and often the wrong information. This can cause disruption to the net by tying up the frequency and prevent important traffic from being passed.

There are three ways we can prevent this from taking place. First, it is the responsibility of the NCS to clear the air during the net if unimportant traffic is taking place. This is a very delicate thing to do at times. The NCS has to get a person to stop transmitting without making that person feel they are not helpful. It is very hard to teach in the heat of the moment. So patience is very important.

Second, get these operators involved in the program, and to training classes. This is the best option, but sometimes a difficult task. They don't want to get very involved, but they want to help. If you hear an operator reporting the wrong type of information and you know them, take a moment and call them on the phone and explain the situation to them as a friend. You do not know how well this will work.

Lastly, and most effectively, teach by example. New amateurs look to more seasoned hams to see how they should conduct themselves on the air. If you are an experienced operator, avoid making unneeded reports. The fewer unneeded reports heard on the air, the less habitual it will become to others.

### What Not to Report:

- Lightning - It is a normal part of thunderstorms
- Rain - It is a normal part of thunderstorms. Only report flooding
- Winds less than 55 mph. (Refer to a wind chart)
- News reports, information heard on the scanner, warning or watches. *This information has already been reported to the appropriate agencies and does not need to be reported again.* If watches or warnings need to be transmitted, it will be left to net control, or a station appointed by net control.
- Anything that does not pertain to the net, or amateur radio's role in it

### Using the Internet:

The Internet is a valuable resource for gathering information. It needs to be used with caution, and only for reference. Much of the information on the web is timestamped. Make sure what you are looking at is current.

Since the advent of the WWW, we have spent a little too much time looking at the Internet, and reporting it. This distracts us from paying attention to the sky. If your group is going to use the Internet to gather information, appoint one person to that duty, and let them decide what is truly important to report to the NCS.

### Asking for information:

Do not check into a formal Skywarn Net and ask what the weather is. Take a few moments and listen to net activity. Asking for the weather takes airtime, and distracts the net. If you need more information, consult your favorite radio station. Net control will alert the net if there is a severe weather warning for Fayette County. This is a hard habit we are going to have to break.

### Safety Information:

Safety is THE primary concern. Let's spend a little time on the subject. Storm spotting, as we all know, can be, and is a hazardous activity. There are a number of threats to storm spotters. Some obvious, some not. These hazards can be divided into four main categories; Travel, Storm, Situational, and Aftermath.

### Travel Hazards:

From personal experience, I have found that travel hazards present more of a danger to me than any storm phenomena. This is not to discount the power of a bolt of lightning, or a tornado, but the act of driving during a severe weather event is probably one of the most overlooked hazards when spotting. Please make sure you and your vehicle are in good condition to go! Most importantly, obey all traffic laws.

Let's face it, there is a lot of adrenaline flowing through your system as you cruise into an area where there is an approaching severe thunderstorm. You are excited, and your mind will tend to race about everything that you have learned in Skywarn classes, or things you have seen in the movies, or on The Weather Channel.

The first order of business is SLOW DOWN! Maybe you have forgotten, but would you like to see a few of the hazards you are presented with, or could be presented with while driving during a storm spotting activation?

- Wet Roadways
- Limited Visibility
- High Wind
- High noise levels
- Debris on the road
- Large Hail
- Flying Debris
- Flash Flooding
- Tornadoes

These, along with everyday hazards we have become accustomed to like traffic, other drivers driving poorly, potholes, and yes even pedestrian traffic all add up into one large list of hazards for the storm spotter. Hazards don't care that you are helping the National Weather Service provide warning for the public. They do not care that you are assisting other disaster preparedness and/or relief agencies. Your chances in the field are all a matter of statistics.

If you proceed with caution, and observe common sense, and safety rules, you will be on the winning side of the statistics. It is not my intent to scare you, but if you are not prepared for what you are getting yourself into, fear may not necessarily be a bad thing. I simply want to emphasize what I feel is a realistic approach to preparing yourself for storm spotting as an ARES member.

### Storm Hazards:

Storm hazards are the most obvious hazards we think of. Heavy rain, high winds, lightning, and tornadoes are what we are expected to see. Combine these hazards along with the normal everyday hazards of being out of our homes. Short and sweet: Rule number one: NEVER GO ALONE!

Because we are not "storm chasers" we can do a lot more planning about spotting locations. How do I pick a good location you ask? Just pay attention while you are driving about your normal daily business. Pay attention to the view when you get out of the maze of downtown. After a while, you will have seen many places around the county with a good view in a particular direction. Mark them on a map if you like.

After finding sites with "a view," evaluate them for safety. Does the site have a lot of utility lines running overhead? Does it have more than one escape route? Is it prone to standing water, or flooding? Is sitting in your car at that site going to endanger you because of traffic? Most importantly, is there nearby shelter? Never leave yourself in a location where you cannot find shelter within a few seconds to a minute.

### Situational Hazards:

Situational hazards are really a combination of other hazards. However, they are important to mention. One of the most common situational hazards I have encountered is "Who the heck are you, and what are you doing here?" I have encountered this response from citizens and law enforcement officers.

Avoiding situational hazards are mostly a matter of common sense, and respect. Just because you are a volunteer for any one of a number of agencies, you do not have any more license to behave in a socially unacceptable manner. A police officer is not going to care that you are trying to get a better view of a storm if you are going 80 miles per hour.

Think before pulling off the side of the road. Are you clear of the lane of travel? Are you blocking the view of an intersection? Never make yourself a traffic hazard. Another good rule of thumb is to make sure everyone can see you.

Never, never trespass on private property. Respect the rights of property owners while going about your activities. If in rural areas, do not block their driveway, drive on their grass, or do anything that will damage someone's property. You are not sanctioned to do that, and if you do, you bear sole responsibility.

From time to time, you will encounter a spotter from another agency. Volunteer firefighters, rescue squad members, DES personnel, or any number of spotters may be out in the field for any of a number of reasons. Each report to their agency, giving their control points requested information. "Share the road" as it were with these personnel. We are all on the same team, even though we may be talking to different agencies. Be professional, and be a team player.

Always carry your ARES and Skywarn identification with you. This will prevent many common misunderstandings. If confronted by a law enforcement officer, having agency and/or organizational identification will save you a lot of trouble explaining why you are sitting outside during a severe storm.

The final situational hazard a spotter can face is forgetting who they are, and their role in spotting. While you are out in the field, you are a representative of Amateur Radio Emergency Service. Your conduct reflects on not only ARES, but also any other agency that ARES is providing communications.

Please remember this. It has taken a lot of time and effort on the part of many people to establish and maintain our good relationship with the community, the various agencies, and local governments. Be professional, and realize that those relationships are very important to all of us. Think before you jump. It only takes one mistake to harm that.

### Aftermath Hazards:

If you are a storm spotter for a few years, you will occasionally get caught in the aftermath of a severe storm, or tornado. I have one piece of advice for these situations. If you have not been requested to be there by an official agency, or have business there, get out!

Disaster scenes are no place for onlookers. If you are in such an area after a storm, immediately leave the area. While leaving, request direction from the organization or agency you are representing. If you do not exit the area, you may very well find yourself in a whole mess of trouble.

If you are asked to go to a disaster area to assist in relief communications for a served agency, remember that you are there for disaster RELIEF, not emergency service. You are NOT authorized by ARES to use sirens or signal lights. You do NOT have to be the first person on the scene and, in the real world, you don't want to be. Most of the relief agencies will need time to get their operations organized and won't be ready for you for a reasonable amount of time, anyway.

After a disaster, residents of an affected area are especially suspicious of outsiders, and are often very sensitive to conversations. Respect their time of trouble by not discussing aspects of the disaster with them unless you have reason to. I have found that a lot of residents do not respect the fact that you are a storm spotter after their house has been leveled by a tornado. If you are in the area for disaster relief efforts, that is all anyone needs to know.

There are inherent hazards to disaster scenes you must be aware of. You may encounter debris, hazardous materials, broken water and sewer lines, broken gas lines and electric lines and other unexpected hazards. Practice extreme care in everything you do. Stay in contact with the agency you are assisting, and never leave the area you are expected to be in without notifying your organization's control officer.

Take care, and safe spotting!