ARES E-Letter 11/21/18

Hurricane Michael: Northern Florida ARES Groups Begin to File After Action Reports

Last month, Hurricane Michael slammed into Florida's panhandle, the most severe hurricane to ever hit the region. ARES groups across the entire state were either directly involved in disaster communications efforts or secondarily involved by providing support via numerous HF and VHF emergency/disaster nets, various modes, and organizations for those in the affected areas. After Action Reports have begun to be drafted and filed with Section and ARES leadership. The reports lend insight into operating conditions and challenges, and all-important lessons learned.

Escambia County (Westernmost Panhandle County)

On Tuesday, October 9 through Wednesday, October 10 at 1700 (almost 18 hours), Escambia County (at the western end of the panhandle) ARES was activated for the County EOC Level 2 activation for Hurricane Michael operations. Assistant EC Joe McLemore, KF4DVF, reported that 21 Amateur Radio operators/stations were involved in total (fifteen county ARES members, and six non-ARES personnel).

The ARES room inside the EOC was staffed by four ARES members. Both open evacuation shelters were staffed by radio operators.The Escambia County Emergency Net (also the local ARES net) was activated on the 146.76 MHz VHF repeater. Several messages were sent via a tactical VHF local net and the HF statewide nets: The Northern Florida ARES Net and the Northern Florida Emergency Net on 3950 kHz, were monitored in the ARES room at the EOC for the following agencies: Red Cross and shelters (also BRACE, the Be Ready Alliance Coordinating for Emergencies), Escambia County Fire Rescue, and Escambia County Emergency Communications.

The SATERN net was also monitored by Eugene Brannon, KB4HAH, per the request of the Salvation Army coordinated through ARRL Northern Florida Section Emergency Coordinator Karl Martin, KG4HBN. Digital modes were also employed in various capacities, including APRS and Winlink. The operators monitored National Weather Service *NWS Chat*, and HURREVAC (storm tracking and decision support tool of the National Hurricane Program, administered by FEMA, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and the National Hurricane Center) was also used. [*NWS Chat* is an Instant Messaging program used by NWS operational personnel to share critical warning decision expertise and other types of significant weather information that is exchanged in real-time with the media and emergency response community, who in turn play a key role in communicating the NWS's hazardous weather messages to the public. NWS partners can use *NWS Chat* as an efficient means of seeking clarifications and enhancements to the communication stream originating from the NWS during a fast-paced significant weather or hydrologic event.]

The new *ARES Connect* system was used to keep Escambia County ARES members notified and to ask for assistance. The ARRL volunteer management, communications, and reporting system allows information to be logged by ARES members and managed through the Field Organization. Six e-mails were sent to Escambia County ARES members via the *ARES Connect*

system. Two Escambia County ARES members volunteered and were deployed to the Panama City disaster area to provide communications support.

All told, ARES time invested included an estimated 70.3 person-hours for direct incident involvement, and three hours for planning and documentation.

Gilchrist County (east of the Big Bend region)

Gilchrist County is a large rural agricultural county bordered on the north and west by the Santa Fe river and the famous Suwannee River, with a population of roughly 20,000.

Gilchrist County EC John Greiner, KJ4YPZ, reported on pre-landfall actions taken Thursday, October 4, activating the county 2-meter ARES Net on the Bell repeater (147.285 MHz) at 7:30 PM. Amateurs were informed on the progress of the storm and of the Nightly Storm Net to begin Monday, October 8. (The storm net designation and operation starts within 72 hours of impact to the area per ARES protocol).

By Sunday, October 7, Michael was still a Tropical Storm. Information was posted by Greiner on the Dixie Amateur Radio Klub web blog page and emailed to all radio operators and ARES members on the contact list. On Monday night, the Nightly Storm Net began operations with briefings. Greiner tested and set up radios at the Gilchrist EOC and station NF4EC. Emergency Management planned to go to Level 2 activation on Tuesday afternoon: By 2 PM, Michael was a Category 2 hurricane and by 5 PM was upgraded to a Category 3. More information on hurricane nets and advisories, frequencies and schedules, was passed. On Wednesday, October 10, the storm made landfall near Mexico Beach as a devastating Category 4 storm.

Gilchrist County ARES monitored the situation at level 3 activation through the passing of the storm. When the State EOC lost Tallahassee radar and the internet, Greiner was able to provide the state EOC staff with timely info on the current location of the passing storm. In Gilchrist, three shelters -- one for special needs at the Bell High School -- had been opened and three persons sought shelter.

Post-storm Recommendations: Greiner said repeaters,HF antennas, cell towers and 911 took blows in the affected areas."There needs to be more reliance on and training with VHF FM simplex and mobile HF antennas and operation for resilience." A local area club has since initiated a simplex net to begin November 20. Greiner is encouraging his ARES members to improve their antennas for operation and participation on simplex nets. He also said "Those that have the capability to go mobile with HF radio and antenna are encouraged to be prepared to use the systems after the storm's passing necessitates the lowering of fixed HF antennas/towers.