

TOWER OF POWER

Marin club joins national ham radio emergency test

By Tad Whitaker
IJ reporter

"CQ Field Day. CQ Field Day. Whiskey 6 Kilo Bravo. Field Day."

It was about 2 p.m. Saturday and somewhere in Wisconsin a man understood what Ron Castro, a 58-year-old Petaluma resident, was saying over a ham radio from inside a tiny, weather-beaten wooden shack at the far end of the parking lot behind the Marin Rod and Gun Club in San Rafael.

Castro was one of about 60 people participating in a national radio emergency test. Ham radio operators from Hawaii to Puerto Rico spent a 24-hour period this weekend reaching each other to test a low-tech network of communication some say would prove invaluable should land-line phone, computer and other systems crash.

"We're completely independent of (land lines). If this was a real emergency, we'd exchange real information."

— Ron Castro
of Petaluma

"We're completely independent of that," Castro said with pride. "If this was a real emergency, we'd exchange real information."

The event at the Rod and Gun Club was a joint effort featuring members of the Marin Amateur Radio Society and the Redwood Empire DX Association, which includes members from Sonoma, Napa and Lake counties. Some had tents and campers set up to spell each other during the overnight portion of the event.

Rich Carbine, a 70-year-old San Rafael resident who serves on the board of the Marin organization, said it is critical to test the national ham radio network.

Emergency officials used local ham operators during the 1995 Vision Fire in West Marin and Marin County officials have outfitted a room at the Civic Center with ham equipment that would be used as an alternative means of communication during a major disaster.

The low-tech reputation of ham radios persists, even though operators have made at least one technological upgrade over the years.

Castro, who became interested as an 8-year-old boy in Philadelphia, said he passed his first ham radio operator test when he was 13. And it was more difficult then than it is today.

"You had to know Morse code back then," he said.



TUNING IN: Jim Robinson stands beneath one of the 55-foot temporary antenna towers used during the ham radio field day at the Marin Rod and Gun Club on Saturday. Fifty amateur radio operators took turns at three field stations trying to contact as many other stations as possible during the 24-hour event. At left, Ron Castro adjusts the radio while logging contacts on his laptop.