

REDWOOD FIRE COMPLEX AND AMATEUR RADIO OCTOBER 2017

Late on Sunday evening October 8, 2017 or perhaps early on Monday morning October 9, a wildland fire broke out in Redwood Valley. By around 3 AM or so trouble was noted in the telephone circuits between Ukiah and Willits making inter-city calling unavailable. This was true both of wire line circuits (at the customer level) and internet carried calls using Voice Over Internet Protocol; (VOIP) calls. It was also observed that cell phone service was unavailable as well as all internet service in the greater Willits area.

Monday October 9: Sensing a major communications interruption was occurring, Ukiah area ham radio resident Jim Cline, W6JRC, was called by the county Office of Emergency Services and requested to set up an alternate communications network using amateur radio operating from the station adjacent to the Emergency Operations Center. This was done using the linked radio repeater facilities owned, installed, and maintained by ham radio operator Greg Glavich, WA6RQX. It should be noted that Mr. Glavich is also the county's chief communications technician. However many ham radio operators were unable to be contacted due to the trouble in the telephone circuits and many were still asleep.

As day broke and many operators became aware of the situation, operators were dispatched to some of the critical facilities in the county, particularly in the Willits valley. Ham radio operator Mike Carter, KC6MGM, traveled from his home near Laytonville to a position at Howard Memorial Hospital (HMH) in Willits and ham radio operator Tim Hanna, WB9NJS, traveled from his home nearby to the Northbrook Healthcare Center (NHC) in Willits and activated the ham radio station installed there. Ham radio operator Carole Judd-Lamb, KI6DJH, traveled from her home in Little River to the Mendocino Coast District Hospital (MCDH) and activated the ham radio station installed there.

As the facility opened for business, the ham radio station installed at the Little Lake Health Center in Willits was staffed by employees Leticia Amador, KI6LAD, and Jennifer Creekmore-Juenke, KI6RJG. Tim Hanna, WB9NJS, at Northbrook was relieved by Brooktrails resident John Lemmer, W6FQX, and Tim became free to be assigned elsewhere including the Baechtel Creek Medical Clinic in Willits and later to the Red Cross shelter at the Willits High School.

Ukiah area resident Don Rowe, KJ6IAH, in his role as Red Cross Disaster Action Team Administrator for Mendocino County, assumed a leadership role at the Red Cross shelter at the Ukiah High School. Because the general Ukiah area did not suffer the general phone service outage as in the Willits area and north, ham radio was not used at the Ukiah HS shelter.

Much of the Willits valley came under an evacuation warning because of the spreading fire threat to the south and east. Concern was expressed regarding evacuating the patients in Howard Memorial Hospital. Radio traffic with MCDH and NHC determined the patient capacity available at those facilities. It was determined that a school bus could not be obtained for transport as it was a government holiday and nobody could be found to authorize such use and/or make one available. A bus from the Mendocino Transit Authority was stationed at HMH for possible transit. Ambulances normally stationed in Willits were not available as the highway between Willits and Ukiah was closed due to fire and both ambulances were on the south side of the fire closure.

The Willits shelter was requested to provide the number of cots present. The report was that 70 cots were set up and there were an additional 70 cots available. There was some concern that might not be enough cots. Longvale resident Don Morose, KF6UDJ, was contacted by ham radio and requested to bring the Red Cross trailer stored at the Long Valley Fire Department. Don used his personal truck and brought the requested trailer to the shelter in Willits. A cursory inspection showed only a large number of cardboard boxes with unknown contents present in the trailer.

Net control operator Jim Cline, W6JRC was relieved by Caleb Cimmiyotti, KK6UEV, and Aaron Steger, KM6CEG mid-day. As the fire fighting activity took hold and the potential evacuation warning was relieved, the radio activity was reduced to a standby status pending another alert. Net control duty overnight was held by Marcella Chandler, KI6MJC, first at the EOC and then transferring to UVMC.

At MCDH Fort Bragg resident Richard Shoop AG6KL relieved KI6DJH in the afternoon and stayed until he was, in turn, relieved by Mendocino resident Stan Fidler, KI6ZOH who held the position overnight.

Tuesday October 10: Net Control operators starting in the morning were KK6UEV and KM6CEG. They were assisted by Gualala resident Damian Nelson, K6CDC. They were relieved later in the day by Orr Springs area resident Steve Turner, KJ6EIF and Covelo resident Gail Harris, KM6CEK.

Normal phone, cell phone, and internet services were still unavailable. KC6MGM resumed his position at Howard Hospital while WB9NJS assumed an on-call status as he lives only about 100 yards or so from Northbrook Healthcare Center.

At MCDH Mendocino resident Stan Fidler, KI6ZOH was relieved by Little River resident Carole Judd-Lamb, KI6DJH.

W6FQX went to the Red Cross shelter at the Willits High School to assess the communications situation there. Naturally they still didn't have any phone or

computer service either. W6FQX carries Red Cross identification and uniform as a Red Cross volunteer. John brought in a mobile radio with a high capacity battery and a portable base station antenna to establish radio communications between the shelter and the Emergency Operations Center – there being no radio communications to any Red Cross chapter.

There was only one extension cord for AC power at the shelter registration desk so, had there been normal communications established, it would have to serve as the power source for any cell phones or computers needing recharging.

A Red Cross shelter supervisor, Patrick McKenna, arrived after being called from the Bay area. The shelter supervisor drove some 8 miles north on highway 101 until cell phone service was discovered and made a report to Red Cross officials.

The Red Cross personal at the shelter requested one additional bariatric cot be brought from the trailer staged at the sheriff's station in Ukiah. Further examination of the trailer brought from Laytonville revealed one or more such heavy duty cots on board and the request for such a cot from Ukiah was cancelled.

After some misunderstanding about possible location assignment, Covelo resident Pat Sobrero, KM6CEJ, arrived at the Willits shelter to provide some temporary operating relief to W6FQX and to get a view and understanding of Red Cross shelter operations. Also showing up to see if they could offer assistance was retired Willits High School Principal Charlie Davison, W6FXO and CERT member Ruth Hubble, KJ6IAG.

The Red Cross personal at the shelter requested an additional wheelchair be brought to the shelter. Howard Hospital refused to release a third wheelchair as they anticipated using all of theirs in the event of an evacuation. An additional wheelchair was located at the Willits Senior Center. Ukiah resident Dave Jordan, KI6ISO was dispatched to Willits to obtain said wheelchair, deliver it to KC6MGM at HMH who in turn delivered said chair to the Willits shelter after the conclusion of his 12 hour shift at HMH. KI6ISO then commenced acting as the radio operator at HMH,

The major logistics traffic for the day involved the planned and actual shutting off of all natural gas service in the greater Willits valley. It seem that the transmission facilities for natural gas came through Redwood Valley (still with active fire) and PG&E thought that those facilities could be damaged if the active fire impinged on them. In addition to resident concerns, the hospital rooms would be cooling off too much for patient comfort plus the lack of water heating would make sanitary hospital laundry impossible and the lack of cooking heat would impair the quality of the hospital food. A source of now-surplus electric heaters was identified and units were transported to the most critical facilities for patient

room heating. Fortunately the fire was no longer threatening the highway between Ukiah and Willits making such transportation possible.

Hospital laundry was shifted off-site to a location on propane power and a variety of other arrangements made for cooking food.

A portable kitchen was offered to the Willits shelter but declined by the high school cafeteria crew who did an extraordinary effort to keep everybody fed, staff and clients. The BBQ'd hot dog was not too bad but the curried eggplant was not as well appreciated.

As Tuesday settled down in the evening hours, WB9NJS continued his on-call status at Northbrook Healthcare Center, KC6MGM was relieved by HMH employee Nick Gradek, KJ6IFS, and the shelter in Willits was staffed by the shelter supervisor Patrick McKenna who was also licensed as WD6QQJ..

In addition, Covelo resident MaryJane Cummings, WA3VUI, commenced a circuit ride between the two hospitals in Willits and the Willits Red Cross shelter just to ensure that everything was under control. The portable amateur station that had brought to the shelter remained in place. She then commenced to hold the net control position from HMH.

Wednesday October 11: By early morning phone service was restored to the Willits area including intercity, cell, and internet phones plus the computer service. At that time the ham radio network was dissolved.

After the active fire was clear of the radio facilities on top of Laughlin Ridge, the aforementioned WA6RQX and WB9NJS made a trip to the ridge to survey the damage and provide additional power to those facilities that had lost AC power and whose batteries had run down or were close to running down. The state and county radio repeater sites that had lost AC power were running on generator power while a few private sites were close to running out of battery power were put back in operation using portable generators. Note that many of the amateur radio repeaters were actually located in the same space as the state or county repeaters thus showing how valuable they were considered before the incident.