

# Japan and Ham Radio Emergency Communications

While sitting in the airport on March 11, waiting for a flight to Charlotte, North Carolina, my BlackBerry® started buzzing with news of a major earthquake in Japan. By the time I landed, we were hearing about the tsunami as well. Of course, at that early stage, no one here had any idea of how massive this natural disaster had been, or that it would be followed by a manmade catastrophe as workers at the damaged Fukushima nuclear power plant tried frantically to prevent a full meltdown. As I write this a week later, the nuclear disaster is still unfolding, and the scope of damage to both the immediately-impacted areas and Japan's economy is becoming manifest. Even offices and factories far from the quake zone have been essentially shut down due to suspension of service on Japan's high-speed rail lines (the country's commuting lifeblood) and rolling power blackouts throughout the country. Ham radio manufacturers were affected to varying degrees, based on the proximity of their factories to the quake zone (see our special report on p. 13).

What I *wasn't* hearing in those early hours, though, were reports of ham radio activity and requests to keep frequencies clear for HF emergency traffic. While Japan is the source for most of our ham radio equipment today, it seems that that country has a different model than we do for amateur radio emergency communications and a different perception of what hams should do in a disaster. Unlike in the US and many other places, hams in Japan do not serve as "communication first-responders," setting up temporary stations capable of operating without commercial power and keeping information flowing while primary public safety and cellular systems get back up to speed. According to CQ Advertising Manager Chip Margelli, K7JA, who is very familiar with amateur radio in Japan, one main reason for this is because Japan's commercial and public safety communications infrastructure is very robust and less prone to overload or failure in an emergency than similar systems elsewhere. So the need for ham radio support in the early hours of a disaster is greatly reduced. (Of course, no one was anticipating a 30-foot tsunami.)

It was only after several days—as power began to be restored to affected areas—that hams began setting up stations at shelters and emergency operating centers, and that the Japan Amateur Radio League's headquarters station, JA1RL, began serving as a focal point and clearinghouse for reports from around the country. Ham radio's role of providing backup and supplemental communications is intact in Japan, just not its "first responder" role.

This could be where amateur radio emergency communications in the US eventually ends up, if the planned nationwide interoperable public safety radio service now being promoted by the FCC and Congress ever gets up and running. But it's doubtful that it will. Interoperability is about more than just having radios that can talk to each other, it's also about having people—trained communicators—who can talk to each other in a language that everyone can understand clearly the first time around. We have so many jurisdictions with so many different protocols and even different 10-codes that just putting everyone together on

the same frequency will not solve our interoperability problems during large-scale emergencies.

The Incident Command System (ICS) and the National Incident Management System (NIMS) were developed to try to combat this non-technical obstacle to interoperability but their success has been marginal at best and we are starting to hear rumblings that proposed new NIMS guidelines water down already thin requirements for training and coordination. We haven't seen the specifics yet, but our sense is that, here in the United States at least, amateur radio emergency communications—combining personal equipment, frequency agility and trained operators—will continue to be a vitally important part of emergency and disaster response for a long time to come. It's still the only thing proven to work "when all else fails."

Again, we have a special report on page 13 of this issue on the disaster in Japan and the ham radio response. Most of it is culled from reports that CQ Public Service Editor Richard Fisher, KI6SN, and I have posted on our new CQ News page on the web (<http://CQNewsroom.blogspot.com>) as events unfolded. If you haven't checked it out yet, please do. We've got links and photos and other cool stuff. We also posted regular updates on our four magazine Facebook pages and sent out periodic updates to our CQ and WorldRadio Online e-mail lists. Be sure to check out our news page regularly (you can link from our home page) to keep updated on this and other ham radio stories.

## On the Hamfest Trail

The Charlotte Hamfest was my reason for being at the airport when news of the Japanese earthquake broke. With its new location in Concord, there's no longer any chance of sharing space with the woodworking show (longtime readers will recall multiple comparisons between the hamfest and the wood show in this column, by both my predecessor, K2EEK, and me). This year, though, we shared the facility with the North Carolina state high school wrestling championships. A little bit of confusion, but also a great opportunity for the hamfest volunteer posted outside the wrestling entrance to not only direct people looking for the hamfest to the right place, but also to explain to many high schoolers and their families what a hamfest and ham radio are all about.

As with Orlando in February, attendance at Charlotte seemed to be up over last year and it was quite crowded into the afternoon on Saturday. We even managed to do a little bit of business on Sunday! As always, the Carolina DX Association dinner was a highlight of this trip ... and the highlight of the dinner for me was two ex-Brooklynites each trying to outdo the other on who was more of a "real" Brooklynite (kind of like being a "real" ham!). It ended in a draw, each reluctantly admitting that the other might indeed actually have come from that storied borough of New York City. Next hamfest for me is Dayton; I hope to see many of you there.

To close on a serious note, we extend our condolences to our industry colleagues, friends and fellow hams who lost loved ones in the quake and tsunami, and our hopes and prayers are with all of those who are struggling to recover. May the spirit of ham radiofriendship help you through these difficult times.

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