

ARES / Red Cross Pineapple Express Exercise

On April 16, 2015, The Red Cross conducted a multi-county Red Cross Shelter Exercise. During this exercise Red Cross simulated a flood and fire event.

Sacramento Valley ARES groups were asked to provide communications for this event. Planning involved developing a ICS-205 communications plan that would allow each ARES group to communicate with the Red Cross Disaster Operations Center (DOC) in Sacramento. Many of the pre-planning documents are available at:

<http://sacvalleyares.org/ListDocs.asp?mpage=RCpineapple>

Each ARES group or the county EOC was to be contacted by the Red Cross shelter manager that a shelter opened and they needed communications. ARES were not to self-deploy. During the exercise, some shelter managers contacted the EOC or ARES rather quickly, some managers made contact late into the event.

This document is a summary of the event, lessons learned, and some of the comments by various ARES groups. The comments have been pulled out as bullet items and grouped according to "Training comments", "Red Cross comments", "Equipment comments", and "Other Comments".

All of the ARES groups did a great job providing communications. ARES groups were able to exercise their communications planning, Call out and activation plans, and in the field communications equipment and skills. Exercises such as this are the perfect time to test our communications skills and readiness, and learn how we can improve our training and skills.

From Red Cross: Scope of Exercise

The Gold Country Region is experiencing a "Pineapple Express" event across all 24 counties.

The full-scale simulation, planned for the week of April 12th, with major play to take place on April 16th. Sheltering sites were set up in Amador, Calaveras, El Dorado, Sacramento, Sutter, San Joaquin, Yolo, and Shasta counties.

Participating Organizations

American Red Cross Gold Country Region, County OES, Southern Baptists Convention, Hands on Superior California, Sacramento Public Health, Local ARES/RACES Clubs

Exercise Overview

Exercise Play Began on April 13

- Weather warnings to ARC personnel
- ARC DOC opens April 14 with ops ARES in DOC activated
- Contact with participating OES established April 15

Lessons learned from the exercise

Several of the participants in the Red Cross shelter exercise sent their comments regarding the exercise. Below is a list of major lessons learned, and many of the comments are listed as bullet items rather than narratives. All ARES groups agreed that this was a good exercise and gave us an opportunity to test our communications skills and readiness.

- ARES and Red Cross should have updated contact lists of ECs and participants
- ARES and Red Cross and other served agencies need to develop a more positive, collaborative working relationship.
- Set up your radios on pre-defined frequencies if possible.
- Learn and practice programming radios with new frequencies by hand as this will often be necessary.
- All ARES groups should be aware of the ARES groups they can contact and have those frequencies programmed into their radios.
- Have a well stocked go kit, lots of batteries, make sure radios are programmed for the event.
- All ARES members need to be trained in message handling and PRACTICE this skill.
 - Slow down when sending messages
 - Accurately copy messages being transmitted
 - Number each message, log, and track it
 - If there is any doubt about the correct spelling of a word either, in the message handed to the operator, or when receiving a message, verify the message or word.
 - Follow up all message requests if no answer is received
 - Messages received from shelters and the DOC should be assigned a priority
 - Understand how to use tactical call signs, and your call sign in exchanges with net control station.
 - Use pro-words such as “OVER” and “OUT”. Do not use Q codes.
- ARES and Red Cross should have an ample supply of message forms. Ideally have a sheet or two of carbon paper to make duplicates of messages sent and received. This will allow Net Control Station (NCS) to maintain a copy of message for documentation and reference.
- Always listen before transmitting.
- Have a good set of headphones that can help eliminate outside noise and distractions.
- Set up your radio station at shelters or the Red Cross in a place to minimize distractions if possible.

Pineapple Express Exercise Comments

Below are the comments that were received from various operators involved in the shelter exercise. The comments are loosely grouped by topic.

Comments regarding Training

- Operators need to slow down when sending a long 213 message
- Messages were transmitted far too quickly to copy, had to request repeat at slower rate.
- Sent message to DOC. Identified that I had ICS 213 message to transmit, was told ready to receive. Message not copied and a request to re-transmit was sent.(third issue).
- Checked in and contacted shelter manager. Missed signing in on shelter sign up form.
- I think the universal problem experienced in this drill was the failure to set up the radios on the defined repeater beforehand. There were many variations of this failure demonstrated: in ability to enter the proper tones or offset, no computer to do the programming of the hand helds or base stations.
- It is important to use pro-words such as OVER and OUT.

Comments regarding Red Cross

- “Leadership is not about giving orders, but involves achieving the respect, confidence, collaboration, and awareness of those involved. The Red Cross management personnel failed in all the above areas.”
- “It was the first time some of our local ARC staff have used the ICS 213 and some request and responses had to be clarified.”
- “DOC was calling for check-ins well prior to call out and dispatch instructions.”
- “Building layout did not allow for accurate management of people in and out of shelter.(too far from and not in view of entry/exit.”
- “The relationship between ARES and the Red Cross needs to be a lot tighter, with established discipline and protocols enforced. “
- “As has been demonstrated many times, in the first few hours, even days, of a disaster, amateur radio can provide an extremely valuable communication link for the Red Cross as it sets up its emergency response.”
- “I am not sure why the County EOCs was asked to participate. There was no activity scheduled for them.”
- “The ARES 213 form is much better for voice although Red Cross wanted the non-ARES ICS-213 form. We had some issues with the hand written forms not being readable by another person which involved re-writing them to make them legible for the other person. The Red Cross liaison really wanted the 213 forms transmitted digitally, which could work if everyone at every location was set up to do it. “
- “At the DOC desk, KC6PSZ, Bonnie, assumed logging and with her multi-agency Fleet Week experience quickly put some order to the process, including establishing a numerical listing of all ICS-213 communications received and forwarded to Red Cross.”

- At the DOC we.. “Did not receive accurate information on shelters opened resulting in time wasted trying to pass urgent message.”
- “Trying to pass or receive message while being critiqued, made it hard to stay on track with message.”
- “ICS 213 forms, trying to figure out if message being passed was being copied on same form.”
- “Verbal messages were hard to pass, should have been written down, added to confusion when not repeated same as first time given.”
- “The ARC people at the shelter were very helpful. The exercise at the Citrus Heights shelter was cancelled due to an evacuation in Citrus Heights, We were released by the shelter manager at approximately 10:30am, then we were told to stay by Red Cross liaison overriding the shelter manager. This doesn't follow ICS protocol and will need to be addressed.”
- “There were issues at the DOC as well. Directions were given verbally and not written, also the by Red Cross liaison kept interfering with the radio operators, this created confusion. This can be overcome with training and additional training exercises.”
- “The biggest lesson learned is the disconnect between ARES and ARC, not a big hurdle, but if not corrected these issues wouldn't serve either group well in a real event.”

Comments regarding Equipment

- “Unable to reach the two designated repeaters, multiple radios and antennas where tried.”
- “Unable to reach the DOC with HF, two radios and 2 antennas' where tried.”
- “We were able to communicate with the DOC by using CARLA from Shasta county.”
- “W6ECE repeater must have a problem. I got a radio check the week before and I was told I had full quieting. A couple of times after that my radio would get a lot of noise, maybe with faint audio, and I would have to keep upping the squelch to quiet it again. I checked this morning and I was able to open the repeater but it was very noisy.”
- “I also noted the CARLA PL was for the linked system.”
- “Our ARC radio had not been hooked into power and we did not have any spare wire with us.” (Local test with ARC)
- One ARES group noted: we will be going over trailer's equipment and restocking some consumables.
- We could not get our bofang ht.'s to save the pl 123, were stuck on 100., also the one radio we used was sending out dtmf tones, had to have a computer to reprogram, we make contact with DOC.”
- Apparently Everbridge notification attempt failed. (Discovered later it was operator error)
- “The day before the exercise we got a call that the Red Cross wanted us also at their main office in Redding. I grabbed a dual band I hadn't used in awhile to take with me. I had doubts about their station setup since their office was in a new location. Sure enough all the equipment was in a cabinet and no antennas installed. I setup my equipment and found that the radio would not turn on. Check

my battery, cables and fuse. No problems there. Finally realized I was pushing the wrong multi function button to turn on the radio. “

- “Yolo County EOC in Woodland, I found the Yaesu 1800 was not programmed for the 147.195 Mhz channel and I had to spend considerable time reprogramming the Yaesu. I used my personal hand held to make the initial check-in and it evidently had weak audio.”
- One operator had his radio tones configured in a manner that it almost made the repeater unusable (much to the consternation of the Repeater's Trustee).

Other Comments in reports

- “We did not pass many messages from the shelter. I think simulating loss of cell phone coverage would give us a lot more to do. “
- “As it was I'm sitting and watching people take/make calls that may not be happening in a real disaster. “
- “We had some issues with our comm trailer but that is something for us to fix locally. “
- “I thought that Yolo County EC, Rick N6KLB, did an excellent job responding to the Red Cross call for assistance.”
- “I would recommend that in the future, an NCS remain on the call-up repeater (KE6YUV repeater), at least until all assigned members arrived at their destination.”
- “When I worked with the San Diego Chapter of the ARC during the San Diego Fire, many amateur radio operators were cycled through their radio room during the first few days of the event. All used Radiograms. The training time was minimal, and the written records retained. There was no problem with different agencies (and there were many) because the radiograms were between amateur radio operators. Any interface to the different agencies (each with their own preferences) was handled by the respective amateur radio operator at the other end.”
- Situational awareness. To make good decisions we need to know what is going on around us. Stressful situations, complacency, and boredom will inhibit our awareness and increase the likelihood of poor decision-making.

Three levels of human error:

1. Slips - misspeak;
2. Mistakes - bad plan;
3. Errors - flawed execution.

Were we kept informed by Red Cross personnel of exercise progress?

- Adaptability and flexibility. The adaptability to react to changes in conditions, including team fitness and equipment failure are based on the situational awareness mentioned above. How receptive are we to differing opinions? Leaders do not necessarily have all the answers, but should remain adaptable to new conditions and challenges.

- “I believe ARES adapted admirably to the ongoing changes directed at us by Red Cross personnel.”
- For organizations (ARES and Red Cross) both professing to be professional, there was considerable room for improvement on both sides of the fence. Understandably, both are volunteer based, but that is no excuse for a lack of professionalism.
- “By far the greatest weakness demonstrated in this Red Cross drill was the message handling. Neither Radiogram nor the ICS 213 format were used and as a result messages had to be repeated. No Word Count was used leaving the Net Control to repeating the message back to the sender to affirm receipt. Also, no preamble was used. This latter deficit caused the Net Control to ask the sender: “who originated this message?”
- “Overall it was a good drill”
- “Radios worked well to DOC primary frequency, used ht for initial check-in. Diamond X50 antenna on tripod should have been set up outside building but was able to use indoors.”
- “In Yolo, 2m Packet system was set up and used during exercise. Sent and received messages.”
- “Hope we can do this (this kind of exercise) again.”
- “It is certainly a good idea to run these drills with the Red Cross.”
- ARES... “Keep up the good work!”
- “When traffic was stacking up, there was a need by DOC to request priority status of calling stations, and to put them in queue, advising they would be called by either priority or in order received. There was a need for a secondary frequency, control operator, and logger at times.”
- “The ARC people at the shelter were very helpful.”