

WINE NEWS

Amateur radio skills prove useful during bushfire emergencies

ABC Central Victoria By Beth Gibson

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PHOTO: Jan Van Ekris from WICEN NSW was one of the many who provided support during the recent bushfires along the NSW south coast. (Supplied: Neil Fallshaw)

Amateur radio enthusiasts have proved themselves useful during the recent bushfires after traditional telecommunication channels broke down.

Amateur radio, also known as ham radio, is a skill and international hobby whereby enthusiasts use specific radio frequencies to communicate with each other.

In Australia, users must complete an exam to obtain a license through the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA).

It was volunteers with these skills who were called in to assist during the recent New South Wales bushfires.

Neil Fallshaw is vice-president of WICEN NSW Communications, a group of volunteers with amateur radio licenses who can help in emergency situations.

He said about 30 members provided a temporary radio system in the Bega, Cobargo, Narooma, and Bermagui areas after some of the local radio infrastructure was damaged or had lost power.

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Key points:

- Amateur radio operators in Australia must be licensed with the Australian Communications and Media Authority
- Licensed volunteers have been providing communications support to emergency services during bushfires
- They are especially useful when mobile phone reception is down

"We deployed one of our radio repeaters on the mountains. We put a radio repeater system on that mountain to cover a portion of the south coast," Mr Fallshaw said.

He said that radio system assisted the NSW Volunteer Rescue Association and Bega Valley Shire Council staff to communicate from bushfire-affected towns like Bermagui and Cobargo.

"They normally use just mobile phones, but the mobile phones in the area were down because of fire damage," Mr Fallshaw said.

Members of WICEN NSW also provided support operating regular radios at fire control centres in towns like Glen Innes, Port Macquarie, and Kempsey.

"They needed people who would be able to operate the radios in a communications environment which can get pretty hectic," Mr Fallshaw said.

WICEN Victoria did not play a role in the fires in Victoria this bushfire season but members were included in some emergency briefings.

"WICEN has a seat on the Gippsland Regional Emergency Management Team," regional coordinator Chris Morley said.

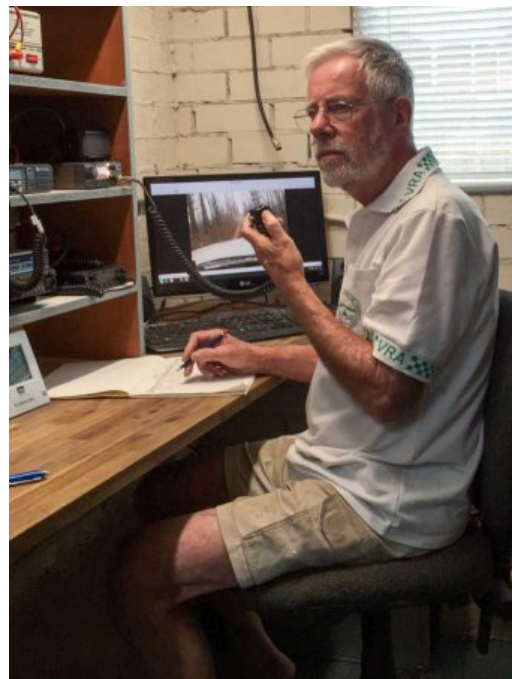


PHOTO: Neil Fallshaw says radio operators were able to step in when mobile phones went down. (Supplied: Neil Fallshaw)



PHOTO: WICEN NSW members operated their mobile unit in Bega during the recent bushfires. (Supplied: Neil Fallshaw)

He said one reason they were not called in this year was because there were more options available to agencies.

"They have new radio systems, and satellite phones were also dropped into isolated remote communities where roads were not opened," he said.

"There are options available these days, which is probably making WICEN not redundant, but less of an option."

Useful during emergencies

The relationship between amateur radio groups and emergency services differs from state to state.

In NSW, WICEN is recognised as a specialist support squad of the NSW Voluntary Rescue Association (VRA), which is a member of the state rescue board.

VRA Commissioner Mark Gibson said the VRA's partnership with the Rural Fire Service (RFS) meant they were often called upon to provide support during emergencies.

When needed, the VRA deploys some of its support squads, including WICEN.

"Within the VRA, [WICEN] would be the most supportive support unit in the current bushfire operations," Mr Gibson said.

"They can man the communications centres around the state, they can man the aircraft radio operators, and they can set up a communications network if needed down the coast."

In Victoria the relationship is less formal, but the group is mentioned as a "support agency" to emergency services in the Emergency Management Victoria (EMV) manual.

"WICEN are an important partner, are represented at a regional level, and are part of the regional emergency management team in Gippsland," a spokesperson said.

Tony Falla, an amateur radio user in central Victoria, said ham radio skills could be particularly useful when there were significant power outages.

For example, like that on the NSW south coast on New Year's Eve when mobile coverage, the national broadband network, and the local ABC radio transmitter all dropped out.

"What I think amateur radio people have going for them is their ability to contact people outside the threatened area when there's no contact inside the threatened area and pass on messages of a health and welfare nature," Mr Falla said.



PHOTO: Radio repeater trailers were deployed to provide a radio network in the Bega area after power was lost. (Supplied: Neil Fallshaw)

"You have a radio in your car or your home, you can run it off batteries, you can run it off solar power — it doesn't require any connection to the internet or the electricity grid."



PHOTO: Tony Falla says amateur radio skills could become more valuable in the future. (ABC Central Victoria: Larissa Romensky)

Considered 'old fashioned'

Mr Falla believes amateur radio skills could become more useful with the increased likelihood of extreme weather events leading to power outages.

"Amateur radio is considered old fashioned; why would you want a radio when you've got the internet?" he said.

"We have proved this year that the situations in place right now aren't adequate in the extreme."



PHOTO: WICEN operators also help with answering calls at the RFS headquarters in Sydney. (Supplied: Neil Fallshaw)

Mr Morley said there were some within emergency services in Victoria who were unaware of the skills amateur radio enthusiasts could provide.

"You have a lot of different staff coming in during emergencies, and while some people know what WICEN can do, probably many don't," he said.

Mr Gibson said the small size of WICEN NSW limited their ability to assist, but the work they had been doing was excellent.

"Since November 9, the WICEN group has completed 2,900 hours of radio communications, and that was only done by 30 members," Mr Gibson said.

"WICEN, as a communications network, you won't get any better."

Topics: fires, emergency-incidents, emergency-planning, information-and-communication, community-and-society, volunteers, lifestyle-and-leisure, radio-broadcasting, bega-2550, bendigo-3550, mallacoota-3892, kempsey-2440, port-macquarie-2444, glen-innes-2370, bermagui-2546, narooma-2546, cobargo-2550