

We advertise the amateur radio service generally and the Amateur Radio Emergency Service (ARES) in particular as the means to communicate “when all else fails.” If we are to wear the “emergency communications” moniker we need to test the system, demonstrate our capabilities, and provide realistic operating experience for our volunteers. Those are the goals of ARRL’s Simulated Emergency Test (SET).

Controlling exercises, cooking up exercise scenarios, and coordinating among agencies are not critical tasks for amateur radio operators. In fact, the more time that you spend doing that, the less time that you’re spending on the critical functions of training, coordinating, and supporting radio tasks. Looking to exercise with other counties’ ARES programs, or other forces like CERT? Have them all register for exercise play (if they’re radio teams) or as actors (if they’re agencies or non-radio functions), and you have exercise controllers that will activate them all, putting them all in play. The only thing you need to do is be sure that you’re all playing at the same time.

Now imagine that not only is the scenario and control actually provided for you, but designed to test, demonstrate, and exercise the fundamental tasks that are part of your “mission profile.”

Exercise operation means that you spend your time on the radio, in shifts, to operate a station on behalf of an agency. Your tasks are to originate messages going out, to deliver messages coming in, and to relay messages to and from the nets that will carry those messages in and out of your area. ECs will spend time managing a schedule of volunteers to see that all of the stations are populated, that additional help is requested of the DECs, and that additional capability is provided to the DECs. The DECs can focus on coordinating resources within the district, as well as providing and requesting additional resources to or from the Section. This is ARES in action: not a group of 10 hams in the local county, but a group of 10 hams in the local county supported by a coordinated system of 1,000 other ARES volunteers working together with scores more in the system of message relay nets to provide resilient communications in time of emergency.

The only way that it could be better is for the operation to result in an After Action Report / Improvement Plan that sets forth the training priorities for the coming year, and becomes the basis for a Section-wide training program to help volunteers of any experience level develop their operating skills for better alignment with the mission of ARES. That’s precisely what this year’s SET is all about.

Answers to Frequently Asked Questions

We have seen a lot of interest from amateur radio groups and individuals for coordinated SET play this year. This is encouraging. Here are some of the most common questions we get, and answers that will help you to plan your participation. We expect that you’ll be challenged but not overwhelmed, working in unusual conditions but within your capabilities, and providing a critical function but not responsible for the success of the whole mission. You’ll be part of a team that is in turn part of a larger team, a system of communications. Can we safely play while we still have community spread of Covid-19?

Yes. Activation will not require any physical movement. Each “site” that has activated, whether a hospital, an incident scene, a shelter, an EOC, or elsewhere, will be a videoconference provided by

Google Meet. When it's time to activate, rather than driving to a location with all of your gear and setting up, you simply set up at home, a park, or wherever you're able to operate safely and with Internet access, get on the air, and join the Meet.

Others in the Meet will be an exercise controller, playing the role of a staff member from a served agency. Is Google Meet hard to use?

Google Meet is straightforward: there's no special software to download and maintain if you're on a computer with a web browser. You'll need a Google Account (you can make a free Gmail account just for this purpose if you like). If you've got a mobile device, there's a simple app you can use. We're also holding twice-daily practice sessions in the run-up to SET so you can have a chance to test your equipment, confirm that things are working as you'd hope, and see how to get the best operation.

Starting September 21, with the last session on October 2, we'll be meeting at 7 a.m. and 7 p.m. every day at <https://meet.google.com/bcs-dzcy-nah>. If you have the app or go just to [meet.google.com](https://meet.google.com/bcs-dzcy-nah), the code that you'll need to join is the same as what's on the right side of the last / in the URL: bcs-dzcy-nah. (When you are activated for the exercise, you'll have a different Meet code, one specific to the location that you will "join.")

We're not asking you to go to all of these: exercise controllers are operating the Meet twice daily for you to test and to gain experience with the system. Join one or more of the sessions, say hello, listen to others, see what's presented on-screen, and develop some comfort with the system if you need it.

I'm not comfortable with handling record traffic. How can I come up to speed on this?

We've got a video series on YouTube that walks through the process of origination, relay, and delivery of messages. A playlist organizes the sessions in a logical order. Parts of the various videos overlap, helping to reinforce critical topics, and to show several applications of the same principle.

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLvYr6g3seaV36sBZUvCV7Y9nibFVQAmPF>

We also have a short series of brief videos (under 10 minutes each) called "Hip Pocket Training," that address specific topics based on actual performance of message handling during the County Information Report Project 20.

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLvYr6g3seaV21B1Puql6R3dHKaqA0amfR>

Is this exercise realistic?

It will be highly realistic in terms of the scenario and tasks undertaken by amateur radio. Artificialities will come primarily from Covid-19 protection protocol (use of Meet instead of face-to-face) and the pace of play (we're not going to overwhelm capacity with need all at once).

The exercise is being run by the Signal Section at the headquarters of 4th Civil Support and Sustainment Brigade, Ohio Military Reserve, an agency of the State of Ohio, part of the Ohio Adjutant General's Office. Other participants include elements from the 179th Airlift Wing, Ohio Air National Guard; Central

Ohio Poison Center; Toledo Emergency Medicine; The Ohio State University Emergency Medicine; Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Integrated Public Alert & Warning System R&D; Department of Homeland Security SHARED RESOURCES HF Program; and others. Each of these forces has an interest in making communication work when it's needed to respond to a disaster.

Message content will be coming from qualified professionals in disciplines like medicine and emergency management, to other professionals in the same field. Radio operators will not likely understand the contents of the messages but nevertheless must be able to support a reliable means for responders in one part of the state to exchange messages with responders in another part of the state.

Many carry professional qualifications but are working as unpaid volunteers because they want to help all of these emergency management and disaster response resources exercise together, to build our capability to work together, making our communities more resilient.

The exercise will be extremely realistic and challenging, but your tasks will be within your capability. We are all responders working together, and we want for everyone to succeed, just as we would want in a widespread emergency where normal communications are unavailable.

Am I going to need to work with federal and military stations?

If you're a volunteer in a local county ARES program or on an NTS traffic net, you'll be working within the amateur radio spectrum. You'll be working with net control operators and other station operators like you, and probably the same ones you work with all the time, supporting agencies in your own area.

In some cases, you might be working with amateur radio operators from other programs. For example, if you're in Franklin County and the number of available operators exceeds the need, the Emergency Coordinator will advise the District Emergency Coordinator of the additional capability. If Knox County (in the same District) needs operators to meet the need there, the EC will tell the DEC that they need more help. The DEC will work with the ECs of Franklin and Knox County to put Franklin Co ARES members on task with Knox Co ARES. Except instead of driving to a location in Knox County, the Franklin County operators will just join the Meet(s) for the site(s) "in" Knox County.

Am I going to need to be able to work HF digital, 60 meters, or other new modes?

Whatever capability you've developed so far is the capability that you bring to the exercise. You're part of a team, so all capabilities are valuable additions. Even if you're able to operate only a 2m HT, you've got yourself an "emergency power" station that's going to count for joining nets, and that you can use for the relay of messages.

In fact, you could be one of several operators "on the scene" (in the Meet) that makes up the auxiliary communications team, and while one with a powerful radio station that can work simplex for the whole county might be the one relaying messages in and out of the net, you can be the one talking to the agency personnel, originating and delivering the messages being transmitted on and off of the site.

I know all of that stuff! How do I put that to use?

On the other hand, if you have capability and experience, we can put that to work. Everyone should find a place in this exercise that's interesting and challenging.

Can you act as a liaison between your District net and the Section net, work the DTN system, Winlink, and NBEMS+SSB on HF, you can volunteer your services at the Section's NTS net, Buckeye Net. Similarly if you have experience as a net control operator on HF, Steve Judd WB8YLO would love to hear from you. Email him at steve@wb8ylo.net to volunteer and get trained up for Buckeye Net procedures.

Do I need to work for 48 hours?

You individually should not work for 48 hours. If your organization can, you should. If you've got a county with 10 participants, it's better to have two or three on at a time in shifts of four hours than 10 all at once. In disaster response, ongoing operation tends to be more important than a short-lived burst of capability. See our video series on the SET for discussions of planning, scheduling, and operating during SET for ECs and Net Managers at https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLvYr6g3seaV0yVw_dc79vhIdd1nMSzkWr.

What if my ARES group or net is tiny? Every group is welcome to play. If you're a small group you might not have an agency of your own to support, but you might be brought in by our DEC to assist another county. Not every county will experience the same level of impact all at once, so resources will be needed at various locations as the scenario develops. Every group of any size can help.

Alternatively, if you're a tiny group in an important area that's affected in the scenario, you might have the agency working with you for help. If the need overwhelms your capability, you need only for your EC to reach out to your DEC to request additional resources, and your operating schedule can start filling up with operators "coming from" other counties nearby to help you support your agency.

If you're an individual operator where there is no active ARES program or your ARES group is not participating, you may contact your District Emergency Coordinator to be assigned to another group in your District. If you don't know where to go, please contact the Section Emergency Coordinator, Stan Broadway N8BHL at stan@standi.com. He will find you the right team to connect to!

Where can I go for more information?

A current version of this Q&A is available from <https://www.blackswancomex.org/2020/FAQ>. The site has additional information for various audiences.

What you cannot get from the exercise web site:

- Your task list (that's up to your local EC or Net Manager, so go to them and volunteer!)
- Your local procedures (we're not micromanaging, you should be using local procedures as you always do)

- Exercise scenario (that will develop in the days leading up to the start of exercise play for the amateur radio stations, just like a real emergency) You can also follow developments on the Twitter feed at <https://twitter.com/kd8tte>.

This sounds intimidating; should I really play? Is next year better?

BLACK SWAN is undoubtedly a large exercise, with many moving parts. But you are not responsible for running the exercise, and you are not being asked to perform every task individually. Whatever your experience and capability, we want your participation. We are going to try things that have not been done before. Everyone will experience some success and some things that don't go right. This is a no-fault learning environment, we're here to help each other improve, and now is the time. Results of the operation this year will be published, and the Ohio Section will be using that information to establish the training priorities and content for the coming year.

We'll do SET again next year, and if you train with us, using the objectives and techniques that come out of this year's performance, you'll be more capable and comfortable next year, and again the year after. That's what this is all about: testing the system, demonstrating what it can do, and gaining experience needed to make the system better.

I look forward to hearing you on the air. 73

Train hard. Have fun