

2013 Oklahoma Tornado Outbreak

Photo courtesy of Associated Press/Carolyn Kaster



President Obama tours the devastation in Moore, Oklahoma following the May 20th Tornado.

For the Oklahoma City metropolitan area, the last two weeks of May, 2013 were plagued by a string of deadly and destructive tornados ranging from EF1 to EF5 in intensity. The most significant of these storms occurred on the 19th, 20th, and 31st in the towns of Shawnee, Moore, and El Reno. Combined, the three twisters claimed the lives of nearly 50 people and left billions of dollars in damage in their paths.

First responders from all over the state were called into action in the aftermath of the storms. Their ability to effectively communicate with one another is critical to the safety and well-being of all Oklahomans in the event of a severe-weather outbreak or other large-scale incident.

Shawnee Tornado

At approximately 6:00 pm on Sunday, May 19th, an EF4 tornado touched down in eastern parts of Cleveland County and tracked to the northeast through northern sections of Pottawatomie County. The twister created a damage path nearly twenty miles long and was on the ground for approximately fifty minutes. The storm reached its greatest intensity near the town of Shawnee, where a mobile home park was completely destroyed. Two people were killed, several others injured, and over thirty homes in the area sustained serious damage in the wake of the violent tornado.

In the initial half-hour after the storm, the OKWIN system became overwhelmed with a massive influx of users. The system soon became maxed-out with the countless first responders already on-scene, combined with those flooding into the area in the aftermath of the tornado. Don Lynch, Director of the Shawnee/Pottawatomie County EM, described how the situation affected his department: "OKWIN became unusable. We had no operability on our talk group with our spotters in the field and no interoperability with response forces in route to and working in the damage path because of the system busies." More education and training on the proper use of interoperable radio resources is crucial to ensure that emergency responders can efficiently communicate during a major disaster event.

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Upcoming Events

July 11, 2013:
Summer SIGB
Meeting

September 2013:
COML Committee
Meeting

October 2013:
COMU Exercise

Moore Tornado

On Monday, May 20th, an EF5 tornado tore through the city of Moore just after 3pm. With peak winds gusting at over 200 miles per hour, the twister created a path of wreckage approximately 1.3 miles wide, leaving some areas of the heavily-populated suburb unrecognizable. More than 300 people were injured during the violent storm and 24 were killed, including 9 children. Over 1,000 homes and businesses were completely destroyed and the cost of the damage left behind by the deadly tornado could reach up to \$2 billion.

The Department of Agriculture's Command-3 was the only mobile communications unit to be deployed in the aftermath of the storm, as there was no perceivable need for a response from either Command-1 or Command-2. Command-3 was used strictly as an animal recovery resource. Fortunately, the path of the tornado stayed mostly clear of any critical communications infrastructure; although one tower located in Moore sustained very minor damage when a microwave was briefly knocked out of alignment.

Photo Courtesy of AP/Steve Gooch

Although the Moore area was spared from any significant communications equipment damage, the initial 24-48 hours after the storm did not come without communications challenges. Down land lines in the area in addition to congested cell phone networks contributed to difficult telephone communications for both emergency responders and the public. In addition, the communications unit that was called to the scene experienced some problems with radio communication, and was disadvantaged by their limited access to cache radio assets. In spite of this, the initial response effort was successfully executed, and fortunately the communications challenges that were encountered were relatively minor.



Aerial view of the damage path created by the May 20th tornado

El Reno Tornado

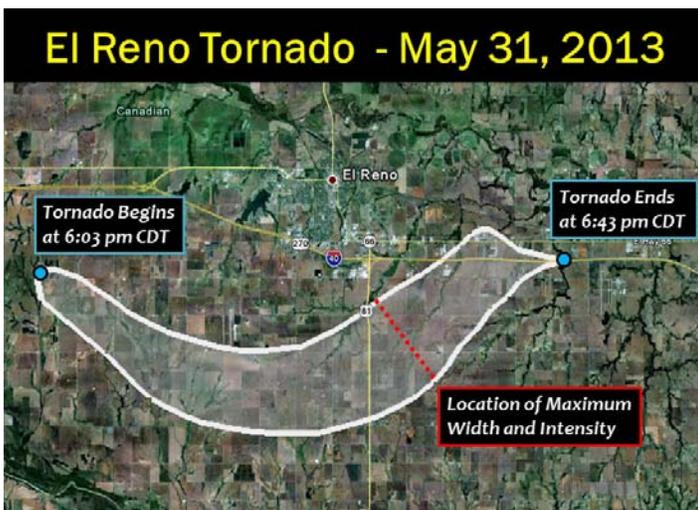


Image courtesy of the National Weather Service

An EF5 tornado struck the town of El Reno on the evening of Friday, May 31st. The deadly twister reached a maximum width of 2.6 miles, making it the widest tornado on record. With wind speeds peaking at nearly 300 miles per hour, the ferocious storm created a 16.2 mile damage path over a period of about forty minutes. The tornado tracked mostly over rural terrain and caused minimal structural damage.

A total of 22 people were killed and over a hundred others were injured as a result of the storm. Eight of the victims died in their vehicles after getting caught on the roadways during the EF5 twister. However, the majority of the deaths were attributed to drowning. Many of the victims attempted to take refuge from the tornado in storm drains and ditches. But record amounts of rainfall caused flash flooding in the area and the people taking shelter were swept away by the raging floodwaters.

U.S. DHS Facilitates IOC Tabletop Exercise

On Wednesday, June 12, dozens of first responders representing various public safety agencies from across the Oklahoma City/Metro area, in addition to several IOC stakeholders, participated in an Interoperable Communications Tabletop Exercise. John Persano of the Department of Homeland Security's Office of Emergency Communications/Interoperable Communications Technical Assistance Program (OEC/ICTAP) facilitated the exercise, which was held at the Oklahoma City Public Works facility. The target objectives for the exercise were to increase awareness of response coordination policies and procedures, address any gaps in communications capabilities, and uncover areas of complexity regarding communication between first responders during a major public safety event.

To kick-off the exercise, the twenty metro-area first responders were presented with a detailed, hypothetical disaster scenario, and were required to fully articulate their agency's communications policies and procedures in regards to the organization of a response effort. Participants spoke openly about their individual agency's communications protocols for major disaster events, particularly those that necessitate a multi-jurisdictional and multi-disciplinary response. Mr. Persano moderated the discussion, while several observers and subject matter experts were in attendance to take written notes of any successful communications practices that they observed, as well as any gaps in communications capabilities. The participants talked through the disaster scenario phase-by-phase, beginning with the initial 9-1-1 phone call and ending with the next operational period and transfer of command. Upon completion of the exercise, both the participants and the observers engaged in a "hotwash" discussion, giving them an opportunity to provide input and feedback in regards to the value of the exercise.

The following day, Mr. Persano presented the IOC stakeholders with a brief After Action Report (AAR) which summarized the communications successes and failures that were observed during the exercise. Several successful communications practices were noted. For example, the use of social media as a tool to notify the public, as well as other public safety agencies of a large-scale event was praised as a creative and useful means of relaying critical and potentially life-saving information to a mass audience. In addition, it was noted that Oklahoma is one of the only states to offer COML and COMT credentialing in the United States. The evaluators were also impressed with the innovative text messaging software currently being used by the Oklahoma County Sheriff's Office called ReadyOp Dashboard. Another success that was highlighted during the AAR was the availability of the Oklahoma Field Operations Guide (OKFOG). The OKFOG is an operational reference guide designed to assist public safety personnel in the state of Oklahoma in the use of interoperable radio resources on a day-to-day basis, as well as during major disaster events.

Several gaps in communications capabilities were also addressed during the AAR. For example: during the exercise, participants exhibited an overall lack of awareness of regional, state, and federal communications resources. These resources could be extremely helpful and potentially life-saving during a major public safety incident. In addition, it was noted that emergency responders tend to rely too heavily on telephone communication, which is more time consuming than communicating via radio, and does not reach as wide of an audience. It was also pointed out that metro area first responders are overly-dependent on dispatchers to communicate with other agencies and jurisdictions for them. Finally, the evaluators noticed a gap in the activation and utilization of COM-L's and COM-T's during large-scale events. A final AAR will take place on July 30, 2013 in order to discuss these findings in greater detail, and to put together a plan of action to reduce the gaps in communications capabilities that were detected during the exercise.

OKFOG Requests

The Oklahoma Field Operations Guide (OKFOG) is a pocket-sized communications quick-reference booklet for first responders. All public safety agencies in Oklahoma may request copies of the OKFOG.

Send requests to IOC@dps.state.ok.us and include your name, agency, number of copies needed, and mailing address.

APCO Radio Testing

The Oklahoma chapter of The Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials (APCO) has been providing free radio testing for public safety personnel across the state since January, 2013. APCO members who are Public Safety Radio Technicians have been volunteering their time to check radios for proper programming and interoperability frequencies. Three testing sessions have taken place already this year, and the final two are scheduled for August 8 in Lawton, and October 14 in Tulsa. All emergency responders in the state of Oklahoma are encouraged to attend. Command-2 is also on-site during each of the testing sessions, in order to help first responders become better familiar with the resource and its capabilities.



Scott Walsh of the City of Norman has been volunteering his time and expertise at each of the testing sessions, and has provided his professional analysis on the current interoperable capabilities of hundreds of public safety radios around the state. Of the radios that have been tested so far this year, Walsh discovered that the majority were not correctly narrowbanded, and many were not programmed with the full suite of interoperability channels. As a result, most of the radios could not communicate with Command-2 during the testing. He also found that many of the departments that participated in the testing have radios that are all programmed differently, significantly limiting their interoperable capacity. Walsh's findings are essential to the on-going effort of improving the communications capabilities of every emergency response radio in the state. It is highly recommended that all public safety agencies in the state of Oklahoma invests in the proper programming and tuning of their radios, to ensure that they can communicate with each other and with other agencies during a public safety event.

Stillwater EM Provides Communications Support for 2013 Special Olympics

Oklahoma State University has hosted the Special Olympics Oklahoma (SOOK) Summer Games every year for the past 30 years. Each summer in May, thousands of athletes, coaches, and spectators meet up in Stillwater to participate in the competition. In previous years, Tinker Air Force Base's 3rd Combat Communications Group (3rd Herd) has provided communications equipment and support for the annual athletic event. But in March, 2012, the U.S. Air Force announced its plan to deactivate the 600 member unit due to recent military spending cuts ordered by President Obama.

Upon learning of the deactivation of Tinker's 3rd Herd, SOOK organizers reached out to Rob Hill and the



Photo Courtesy of Special Olympics Oklahoma

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Stillwater Emergency Management team for assistance with communications support for the 2013 summer games. With 4,700 athletes, and 14,500 coaches and spectators participating in this year’s games; efficient communication between organizers, volunteers, and public safety personnel was critical to the overall success of the event.

Under the direction of Rob Hill (and with the help of additional radio assets provided by Radio Resource Inc.), the Stillwater EM team was able to provide effective communications support for the 2013 SOOK summer games and the three-day event was a huge success. No major communications challenges were encountered and Stillwater EM has expressed their desire to offer their time and resources to the Special Olympics for many years to come.



Interoperability Continuum



Oklahoma has adopted the SAFECOM Interoperability Continuum as a guide and directional goal to gain seamless communications interoperability across the state.

About the Oklahoma Interoperability Newsletter

The *Oklahoma Interoperability Newsletter* is designed to be a source of information, news, and updates for stakeholders committed to public safety communications interoperability in the state of Oklahoma. We hope that it will serve as a valuable resource for you. If you would like to contribute to the newsletter, or for comments or suggestions, please contact Nikki Cassingham at ncassing@dps.state.ok.us or Kayla McCleery at kmccleer@dps.state.ok.us.