

REPORT

Neighborhood Radio Watch and the Caldor Fire



SW Corner of Caldor Fire Seen from Oak Hill Neighborhood Radio Watch

— © Steve Gregorich

Questions. Many of us had questions about how the Neighborhood Radio Watch system would operate during a genuine emergency. Would the repeater stations burn and go down? Would people panic and clutter the radio net with confusion? Would Net Controllers evacuate and leave the net directionless? Would people call in redundant reports and confuse the Net Controller and the 911 operator?

What lessons would we learn the first time our radio nets deal with a genuine emergency? The Caldor Fire moved directly across 2 of the 5 community groups covered by Neighborhood Radio Watch repeater stations. It was a test of the system in a genuine wildfire emergency.

At my home in the Oak Hill area, high at the top of Buck Ridge, I can reach all of the repeater antennas used in the Neighborhood Radio Watch with my handheld radio. This article is a report of what I saw from my deck and heard on the radio nets during the Caldor Fire.

Background. The radio net system expanded over the past year to include 5 repeater antennas serving five major community groups on the West Slope of the Sierras. The community groups are: Pollock Pines/Camino, Placerville, Oak Hill, Cosumnes River (antenna located on Mt. Aukum) and Lotus/Coloma. Each of those localities are composed of several communities within range of one of the repeater antennas.

Each NRW has several persons designated as “Net Controllers.” Advance training for the net controllers had begun before the Caldor Fire. There are presently six training topics for Net Controllers. Two days prior to the Caldor Fire, 50 members of the Pollock Pines/Camino NRW completed “Event Net Operations and the Incident Command System” as part of the “Emergency Net Operations” training module.

As the Caldor Fire moved through the Grizzly Flats area and then the Pollock Pines/Camino area, it was moving through two of the community groups served by Radio Net repeater antennas. All radio net members, in all of the radio watches, could listen in as neighbors dealt with the advancing fire. Most people in the Oak Hill Radio Net, for instance, can also “reach” the Pollock Pines/Camino and the Cosumnes River repeaters, so they could follow along — they had a front row seat!

I was one of those in Oak Hill who listened with my handheld radio. Like most people in Oak Hill NRW, I was ready to help but I had no active role to play, I listened and stayed out of the way of those who had important work to do. I often felt reassured because I was getting updated, correct and timely information.

What did the Net Controllers Do During the Fire? The net controllers verified reports through their connections with emergency services, corrected inaccurate information, repeated verified evacuation directions and answered questions. They also tracked the location of radio net members who volunteered their whereabouts as they evacuated.

What Did the Net Members Do During the Fire? Many radio net members called in using the procedures they had practiced each week during the practice radio net sessions. If two called in at one time, they knew how to take direction from the Net Controller — who goes first, who waits. They knew how to start off with their call sign, enunciated clearly, and how to follow that with their name and their location.

These skills may seem simple, but they are critical. The Net Controller must be able to understand who is calling and where they are located.



Colton Meyer, Net Control for the Cosumnes River NRW, where the Caldor Fire Began

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Members asked questions about road closures, alternative evacuation routes, animal shelter locations, where evacuated persons could get their mail and how to contact Animal Rescue. Members also recounted their sightings of the fire — sometimes, those sightings were critical.

I recall three sightings reported by radio net members in the Cosumnes River Radio Watch that were first reported to 911 and were the first call-ins for those particular outbreaks — thus initiating the quick response of fire fighting teams. These were not burning embers rekindling a blaze within the fire zone — two were miles outside the fire line and one was on the fire line that had been put out the previous day.

The sighting reports were important in several ways. They got the information to the first responders. So long as there was time and they and their families were safe, they reported the sighting on the radio net where EVERYONE LISTENING could know of the report. That way, other fire spotters would not flood 911 with redundant calls about the same thing. This is one of the several examples where being on a radio net can perform a service that telephones cannot and it also demonstrates a situation in which using telephones alone can overwhelm the 911 operator and create a communication block.

I had two personal experiences with fire spotting during the Caldor Fire. Looking from my deck I could watch the Westward advance of the fire. One time I spotted a new column of smoke after the fire facing my neighborhood was supposed to have been put out. The column was just outside the fire line. I had not had my radio turned on so I did not know if anyone had already spotted the fire. I took a compass heading and estimated the location of the smoke column using Google Maps. Then I called Mary Dakers, our Net Controller, to see if the smoke had already been reported. It had, and the net controller was able to verify that emergency units were on the way, so I did not call 911. In this way, the radio net helped me to avoid burdening the 911 operator with a redundant call.

In another instance, I had my radio turned on and heard a member giving the location of a new fire far outside the Caldor Fire zone. I walked to my back deck and was able to verify and help fix the location more exactly. It turned out this fire also had been called in by another NRW member, units were on the way and it was not necessary for us to call 911.

Were There Any Lessons

Learned? I think we have all learned that any growing project suffers growing pains and changing things can cause unintended consequences. Because we know there can be dangers in new things, we can grow pessimistic and expect that things will go wrong. I think back to all the things that my neighbors and I discussed that might go wrong before the Caldor Fire, such as:

1. Net Controllers would have to “get out of Dodge” and leave the radio net unattended. We realized during the Caldor Fire that there is significant overlap in the system so that when a net controller has to evacuate there are other net controllers in other communities who can take over, operating through the same repeater though they are miles away.

Such a thing actually occurred during



J R Harmon, an Evacuated Net Controller from Pollock Pines, Operating his Weekly Radio Net from my Driveway

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the Caldor Fire when the net controller of one radio watch, Colton Meyer, had to evacuate — but when needed, a net controller from another radio net, Mike Summersille, took over from his own station for as long as that particular incident required. In fact, there were many controllers within the system who could have taken over that radio net if necessary.

In another incident, when all the net controllers in the Pollock Pines/Camino NRW had to evacuate, they were able to continue managing the station from a distance and even carried out the usual weekly radio watch with the evacuated residents — J. R. Harmon used his mobile radio while parked in my driveway just outside the evacuation warning area. From there, he first called the roll, as usual, while transmitting through his neighborhood repeater 6 miles away. Then, because he knew that his neighbors were evacuated and scattered across the countryside, he repeated the roll call using first the Placerville repeater and then the Oak Hill repeater.

Lesson learned: There are backup net controllers, stations can be operated from outside the community and repeater antennas provide significant overlapping coverage.

2. Might a repeater station lose power? Though the Caldor Fire swept through two of the NRWs and PG&E turned off electricity in several locations, all repeaters continued to operate.

Lesson learned: Because the repeaters are sometimes located on high points outside the community; because they all have backup power; and because the transmitting ranges of the repeaters significantly overlap one another, there is good reason to expect that, as a system, they will continue operating in an emergency.

3. If you give all members access to all the repeaters, can you trust them to behave with discipline? As it turns out, and as it has been demonstrated in the Caldor Fire, the answer is a resounding YES!

Lesson Learned: People are capable of understanding that some channels are emergency channels and need to be kept clear for emergency traffic. After all, someday it may be their home and their lives at risk. At such a time, they will want the emergency channel clear of all but emergency traffic. Consequently, when you dial in a repeater channel on any given day, you are most likely to hear silence.

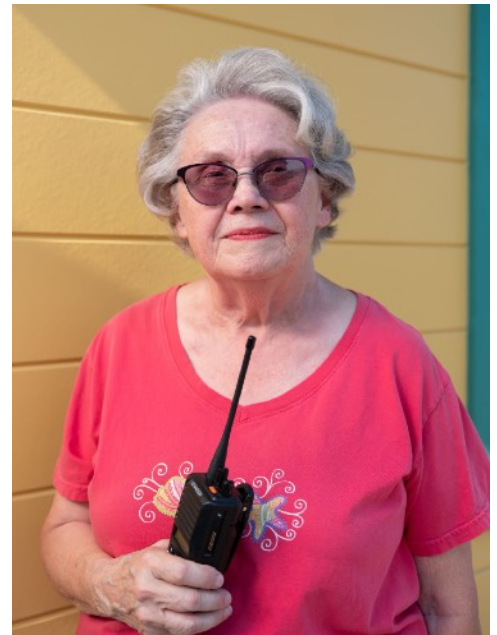
Looking Forward. Law enforcement officers and firefighters are the heroes of the Caldor Fire. They will continue to operate seamlessly among themselves taking advantage of radio nets assigned to their own exclusive frequencies and using their own net controllers and repeaters.

Citizen radio nets, such as the Neighborhood Radio Watch system, use the same kind of repeaters and net controllers to provide similar communication within and among many communities. The Caldor Fire experience suggests that these two systems can continue to develop cooperatively.

But the Caldor Fire was not often propelled by high winds. In comparison to fires such as the devastating Camp Fire, Caldor moved slowly. Will the Neighborhood Radio Watch system be prepared to operate effectively in a future wildfire that moves with greater speed? That is a question yet to be answered.

I think a positive answer to that question will depend upon the care with which the NRW system expands and the quality of training that becomes standard for all members certified to be net controllers.

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Mary Dakers, Net Controller & Spotter for the Oak Hill NRW atop Victory Mine Ridge

