

## **East Alabama SKYWARN Net Standard Operating Procedures**

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The East Alabama SKYWARN Net is composed of volunteer radio amateurs who make their services, training, and skills available during severe weather and weather related emergencies.

**Purpose:** The primary purpose of this net is to activate when severe weather threatens East Alabama, and engage in the spotting and tracking of dangerous thunderstorms and tornadoes. Our intention is to assist with the coordination of this activity by providing a means of communication between amateur radio operators serving as SKYWARN / severe weather spotters and local public safety agencies and the National Weather Service. It is our hope that this coordinated effort will result in the general public receiving the earliest possible forewarning of weather emergencies. This communications network is also made available to amateur operators affiliated with their county's EMA during declared emergencies.

The East Alabama SKYWARN Net primarily functions to relay severe weather information and “ground truth” reporting to the National Weather Service Office as well as public safety agencies, and Emergency Management Agencies as appropriate and beneficial to public safety. Additionally, while “broadcasting” information is not permitted by the FCC, there are citizens without amateur radio licenses who choose to monitor local “ham” activity using scanners or other types of receivers. Those people may be “listening in” during East Alabama SKYWARN Net activities, which underscores the importance of adhering to the SOP for the net, especially in terms of transmitting only factual, first-hand information to Net Control and avoiding unnecessary or confusing information being passed via the net. Even though it is referred to as “Amateur Radio,” we all want to exhibit a very “professional” image to our fellow amateur radio operators, public safety agencies and other agencies, as well as the public in general. Doing so while participating in the East Alabama SKYWARN Net could make all the difference in amateur radio being a service of benefit to the citizens of the East Alabama area, as opposed to it becoming a potential burden or liability. During East Alabama SKYWARN Net operations, it is always a good idea to ask yourself “Is this information important, necessary, and of benefit to public safety?” before keying the microphone to transmit. If it is, then call it in to Net Control. If it isn't, then it's best not to tie up the frequency, the repeater(s), or the Net Control Operator with information that isn't critical.

The East Alabama SKYWARN Net is NOT a “storm chasing” net and does not encourage such. Amateur Radio operators who wish to participate in the net by “spotting” and reporting important weather information from their home, business, or another location are welcomed to do so. But the East Alabama SKYWARN Net endorses the non-storm chasing policy of the NWS. You should never put yourself in harm's way to chase a storm or try to get closer to the action. Anyone choosing to “storm chase” or otherwise go against the personal safety advice shared in NWS SKYWARN Spotter training do so at their own risk. The East Alabama SKYWARN Net is not responsible for personal injury, death, or property damage occurring due to a spotter's/amateur radio operator's choosing to engage in risky activities or behavior.

**Coordination:** This net is strictly organizational in nature. It is primarily a coordination and support effort and in no way imparts any authority, privileges, or responsibility to its participants. The preferred mode for traffic into this net is via direct amateur radio contact. Individuals outside the East Alabama area are encouraged to “check-in” and maintain communications with and through their local SKYWARN nets, but are still welcomed to check-in with the East Alabama SKYWARN Net as well. The SKYWARN Net will, however, recognize ANY station that has emergency or priority traffic, (see “reporting” below). This net may also attempt to contact stations in selected areas for the purpose of confirming radar observations.

**Participation:** To participate in this net one needs:

1. An FCC Amateur Radio License Technician Class or higher
2. A willingness to volunteer his/her services
3. A thorough understanding of these operating procedures

Additionally, participants in the net are highly encouraged to have SKYWARN Spotter training from the National Weather Service. The NWS conducts on-site and online basic and advanced SKYWARN Spotter training classes at no charge. Visit their website for a calendar and info onsite courses and online courses. The East Alabama SKYWARN Net also encourages participants to complete the Incident Command System (ICS) training (courses 100, 200, 700, and 800 are recommended) from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). The FEMA courses are available for self-study at your own pace online, and there is no charge for participating in those course.

**Frequencies:** This network will utilize a VHF repeater system, which provides optimal coverage for all of the East Alabama counties. The repeater system is designed to allow stations to use low powered handheld and mobile radios, thereby eliminating the risk of operating on an external antenna during thunderstorms. With the repeater system, it is possible to set up direct communications between persons located virtually anywhere across East Alabama and that traffic can be relayed to the National Weather Service in Birmingham and/or other public safety agencies as appropriate. The repeater frequencies are: 147.060 MHz, (+) offset, PL tone 123.0 Hz (Lee County) and a backup of 147.120 Mhz, (+) offset, No PL tone (Opelika)

**Severe Weather Activation:** An ESTABLISHED NET CONTROL OPERATOR will activate the East Alabama SKYWARN Emergency Net anytime the NWS issues a Severe Thunderstorm Watch, Tornado Watch, or receives a specific request from the NWS office or a county EMA to activate. The Net Control Operator may be located at his/her residence or at a county Emergency Operations Center / Emergency Management Agency upon specific request by such agency. Persons are asked to pass amateur radio weather traffic to the East Alabama SKYWARN Net Control Operator only. Upon activation of the East Alabama SKYWARN Net, participants in the net (and other amateur radio operators in the East Alabama area and coverage area of the VHF repeaters used for the net are asked to keep the frequencies clear for weather-related traffic, and especially for EMERGENCY and PRIORITY traffic. **IMPORTANT: THE SUCCESS OF THIS NET DEPENDS ON EVERYONE USING DISCRETION WITH THEIR MICROPHONES. PLEASE DO NOT TRANSMIT UNLESS IT IS ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY.** Do NOT transmit to pass general weather information such as it is raining, the clouds are getting thicker, it is lightning off to the west, etc. Traffic of this nature is of no real use to the net and only ties up the frequencies from critical information. Always think before you transmit! Remember that several hundred hams, private citizens, and media agencies are listening all across East Alabama. Just listening and calling when you have severe weather to report is the best help you can provide a severe weather net! The NWS office from time to time offers spotter training, and it is strongly recommended you take the classes that are offered.

**Reporting:** The NWS is especially interested in the following:

1. Funnel cloud or tornado
2. Wall cloud with or without rotation
3. Location (reference to major town or crossroads)
4. Event Time-Always give a relative time. This is important! Most all reports older than 15 minutes are of little or no use during a severe weather event. NEVER send in reports from a second source such as news media... Example: "Channel 83 says it's all clear in Limestone county" or "they are saying on the scanner in XYZ county that it is clearing to the west". These kinds of reports only confuse the conduct of this net and its purpose!

5. Give wind speeds in mph.

6. Hail- Always give hail size in reference to coins such as dime, quarter or 1/4 inch or 1/2 inch hail...etc. Generally, less than a quarter of an inch should not be reported. Avoid using "marble or pea size" to describe the size.

In the event of persons injured or killed, or situations involving imminent danger or threat to persons or property, use of regular telephones or cell phones to call 9-1-1 and report the situation to public safety should be an amateur radio operator's first-priority and first action. Do not delay such a call in order to pass the information to or through the East Alabama SKYWARN Net. However, in the event of such an emergency, amateur radio operators who do not have telephone access readily available for any reason may "break" the net to pass the information to Net Control, who will immediately contact 9-1-1 as an emergency/highest priority function. Stations needing to contact Net Control for this purpose should transmit "BREAK... BREAK... BREAK... this is [station call sign]" and the Net Control Operator will suspend other traffic and respond to the station with emergency traffic immediately in order to get the information and pass it to public safety agencies via 9-1-1 immediately. All other traffic by other stations should hold any other non-emergency traffic until the Net Control Operator announces that the "emergency" traffic has been handled and he or she is ready for further net-related traffic.

When sending a report in to the Net Control Operator ALWAYS relay your report with reference to the nearest city or town. For example: I am seeing a wall cloud in the Beauregard community 6 miles South of Opelika. This reference to the nearest town or city will help NWS officials in Calera who are not aware of the location of the hundreds of small communities and crossroads in East Alabama. Please remember that the purpose of the net is to RECEIVE severe weather reports from spotters in the field and help the NWS verify what they are seeing on radar. The net is not intended as a "one stop weather source" for all weather information you may request for a certain area... The net may relay conditions in a certain area for the storm spotter's safety, but detailed weather information requests to net control for a particular community only tie up the frequency, and should be gathered from NOAA weather radio, TV or Broadcast Radio. It is not the intent of this net to provide amateur radio operators with "up to the minute forecasts for their community". Please remember that in order for the net to be successful in its true purpose.

**Alert Status:** The Net may be downgraded to an alert status if a Watch is in effect, but there is not any severe weather immediately threatening the area. Recreational use of the repeaters is permitted during Alert Status, but please keep transmissions brief and allow pauses in between. If a weather emergency arises, the NET CONTROL OPERATOR will resume the controlled net.

**Deactivation:** When all severe weather bulletins are canceled or expired, the net will close and the repeaters will be returned to their normal use.

**Training Net:** The Training Net is held on each Tuesday at 8:00pm and is used to review and practice the principles as outlined in these standard operating procedures.

**Sponsors:** The repeaters utilized for the East Alabama SKYWARN net are supported by the East Alabama Amateur Radio Club.

This June 2012 S.O.P. is in effect as of June 1, 2012. Any and all previous versions are no longer used.