

Hawke's Bay — John Newson ZL2VAF/ZK2EXC, AREC District Manager Eastern

AREC and Civil Defence activated the ECC in Hastings, testing the CD radio network up the East Coast and set up ready for Cyclone Gabrielle. The severity of the cyclone caused significant damage including power outages, with the main high-voltage substation that fed the wider area flooded. The rivers rose so high that the bridges between Napier and Hastings became unpassable, which meant a number of AREC/CD communications volunteers were cut off and unable to attend the ECC. In the first 48 hours, only three members supported the comms in 12-hour shifts with very little sleep; a mammoth effort by these three.

On the 13th, the CD volunteer team leaders called in to prepare for a likely event. All the handheld radio batteries were put through the chargers to ensure that they were fully topped up and ready to go. Some of the Rapid Response team were on hand getting equipment and vehicles ready. The Welfare team arranged to have the local sport centre set up as a welfare centre. We did regular radio checks with the sport centre.



In the early evening, the Eskdale Holiday Park called in to say the river was rising and those at the campsite were being evacuated to the local marae. I was asked to give 24-hour communications coverage and so gave Rob Wallace ZL2SG a call. He arrived just before 2000 hours, we did a handover and I left shortly after, prepared to come back at 0800. Rob was stood down at 2100 as Emergency Management didn't think they needed communications overnight.

I arrived at 0745 on the 14th to find people waiting on the radio at the other end for someone to answer them. This is when things started to hit home. Kereru School called in to say they were completely blocked in with slips. The marae that the campground had evacuated to was out of power and the toilets were flooding. Hukarere College had also evacuated to the marae. They couldn't get portaloos, so everyone there re-evacuated to St Joseph's College in Greenmeadows.

John Montgomery ZL2MB came in mid-morning after not being able to contact me and Ray Barlow ZL2RB came in about an hour later. Ray had been listening to the radio traffic and had also tried to contact me but I wasn't replying. Being busy, my phone was ringing until it went to messaging, so he came in to see what was happening and if I needed help.

We had limited communications with Wairoa through the emergency management advisor's 4WD Ute. We had a schedule set so that the Emergency Management Controllers could talk to each other over the radios. We started handing out our handheld radios to those who needed them and assigned radio repeaters as necessary.

Unfortunately, COVID had depleted our volunteer organisation so much that we were unable to deploy as we had planned and we started assigning call signs and repeaters on the fly. For example, we had one firm called Drainways that was sourcing generators from all over the place, and they had two of them on the repeater. We gave them a call sign of Drainways-1 and Drainways-2.

We gave out lists of repeaters highlighting the three that covered the most area and instructed each user to switch to another repeater if the one they were using wasn't working. We monitored all the repeaters and could reassign on the fly as long as they got onto one of the remaining repeaters. The main repeater we were using was on top of the Kaweka Ranges and it was powered by battery/solar. This repeater never missed a beat, although it got a little scratchy for a while until it got some sunlight back. We also lost our Taraponui repeater for about six hours and the next day we lost Kahuraniki [Kahuranaki] for around 18 hours.



By the 15th, some internet and cell phone connections were coming online. Starlink systems were being flown all over the place and our message tally started to fall. We were still the main source of communications but that was slowly changing.

We had one urgent call from an outlying district about a man having heart problems. They were going to cross a bridge that had water flowing over it but were dissuaded by one of our CD volunteers who had a radio. He called us for help and we got hold of 111 emergency, who picked the man up by helicopter.

By the 16th, cell phone access had started becoming available over wider areas and we were getting more people able to come and help at the communications centre. The Clive Bridge was said to be passable and the Napier CD volunteers were heading to come over and help. Then they closed the bridge as unsafe, meaning the volunteers could not get to the comms base. To be honest, that was the one thing that really deflated us.

I contacted my AREC Regional Manager, Don Wallace ZL2TLL/ZK6EXC, and he said to have a think who was available locally. He was going to get hold of Peter

Moore ZL2HM, who is the local club treasurer. I had another ham who I knew really well, a truck driver, and I doubted he would be driving with all the roads down. Nathan Foster ZL2ND was available and willing to help us out for a few days; he also signed up to join AREC while doing a shift! Tamsin Mendis, one of the CD volunteer radio operators, was also available for the day. At last we could start pulling the hours back and were running three eight-hour shifts.

On the 19th, the cavalry arrived at last. The road link between Hastings and Napier opened, though it took an hour to do a trip that would normally take about 15 minutes. We had enough volunteers to do three shifts with two on each shift, though we were asked if we could drop the night shift and do 0600 to 2200 each day with two shifts. We were only handling a few messages each day by this time, so we agreed. On the 21st, we dropped down to one shift from 0800 to 1600.



On the 24th, we were asked if we could go back to 24-hour monitoring as there was another large rainfall event expected in the ranges. The Regional Council Works Group were out all night keeping an eye on the rivers and the Controller wanted to have immediate knowledge of any problems so they could react quickly. It was a very light workload with very few communications being passed, but we were ready to respond if needed.

A big thank you to the AREC and CD volunteers who spent many long hours providing essential communications supporting the community, with an extra special thanks to those who worked extended hours early on. They deserve all the accolades they can be given.

Te Tairawhiti (Gisborne Region) — Mike Mather ZL2CC, Volunteer

Tairawhiti was hit really hard, with all communication going out for a lengthy period. Long before the last cyclone hit the North Island, a small group of hams set up emergency communications via 'HF' radio to enable the passing of messages from Gisborne area to the outside world. The hams in Gisborne area were Roger (ZL2RC), Tom (ZL2MOT) and Mike (ZL2CC) and the 'out of town' station was Barry (ZL2BJA) in Palmerston North.

As soon as Cyclone Gabrielle hit over the night of the 13th and morning of the 14th, the 'net' (as they are called) sprang into action. They kept regular contact with Barry ZL2BJA for days and passed on several personal messages via the radio where Barry sent them off as emails to the various people who had requested such information.

As Mike ZL2CC is located in Te Karaka (where some of the worst flooding was and about 80% of the houses had water through them), many messages were sent from the local township, along with reports of damage, road conditions, etc.

It wasn't long before poor Barry ZL2BJA was inundated with requests, as other hams from all over the country were asking him for information about family and friends in the Gisborne and Hawke's Bay areas. Luckily, he was joined by other licensed amateur radio operators listening in and helping send emails, etc, and in some cases actually visiting houses to perform welfare checks on their behalf.

Our team used HF radio and it was just as well as the internet was down, power was out and the cell phones dead. The local VHF and UHF repeaters were set up to be used in the Bay of Plenty and Hawke's Bay, which were hit hard and had their own communications problems as well.

Barry ZL2BJA and others did an excellent job and I know it would have been hard work taking messages and information, passing it on usually by email, and sometimes by any means possible. This is what the amateur radio community are trained to do; to always be ready to help out in an emergency such as this.

You may think we are geeks, but we can be useful and helpful geeks.



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