Meeting with FEMA Officials

March 22, 2013

Washington, DC

Trip Report

http://www.fema.gov/blog/2013-03-29/hi-im-craig-kk4inz#.UVcYzKeJ-j0.gmail

Last fall, FEMA’s Chief Technology Officer Ted Okada (ARRL member K4HNL) reached out to the ARRL to discuss updating the ARRL’s memorandum of understanding with FEMA. At the National Convention, Dave Sumner, Mike Corey, and I had lunch with Ted and found him to be highly enthusiastic about Amateur Radio as an asset in disaster management. A meeting with senior FEMA officials in Washington was scheduled for early November, 2012. However, Hurricane Sandy made it necessary to re-schedule the meeting for March, 2013.

Dave Sumner, Chris Imlay, Mike Corey, and I represented the ARRL at the meeting at FEMA headquarters in Washington, DC. Ordinarily, that many red badges would not be needed for a discussion with an agency with which we have had an agreement for many years. However, given the prominence of this federal agency, which was brought under the Department of Homeland Security in 2003, I thought it was a good idea to have substantial horsepower and institutional memory on hand while we figured out how the land lies at FEMA these days.

Dave, Chris, Mike, and I had lunch with Ted Okada before the meeting at the hotel next door to FEMA headquarters. Thinking “nothing ventured, nothing gained,” we asked Ted if FEMA might be willing to give us a statement endorsing the ARRL’s legislative efforts with regard to CC&Rs since these restrictions hamper Amateurs’ ability to train for and participate in disaster communications. The answer, which did not surprise us, was no.

The meeting was held in a conference room near FEMA’s National Response Coordination Center room. If you have ever been in an emergency operations center (EOC), think of one about half a dozen times as large.

FEMA’s lead person at the meeting was agency Administrator Craig Fugate (ARRL member KK4INZ). Also representing FEMA were Damon Penn (from National Continuity Programs) and Gwen Camp (from Intergovernmental Affairs). In addition, David Turetsky was present. He is Chief of the FCC Bureau of Public Safety and Homeland Security.

Coming from an emergency management background in Florida, and having a license himself, Craig gets Amateur Radio. No sales pitch was necessary for his benefit. Craig appears to be a plain-spoken individual whose conversation with us was free of federal-bureaucrat-speak. He is enthusiastic about finding ways for FEMA to help make the case for Amateur Radio to emergency management professionals who do not already understand its value.

We discussed the perennial problem of credentialing for operations outside one’s home area. Although he understands the issue, Craig was forthright about not having a fix that could be introduced at the federal level.

We discussed working on some joint exercises that would be mutually beneficial and that would give state and local emergency management officials opportunities to observe the capabilities of Amateur Radio operators.

We talked about the ARRL’s current consideration of FCC rules governing encryption and data rates, as these are issues affecting emergency communications operation.

Another development was discussion of how best to keep the ARRL’s emergency preparedness staff in the loop with FEMA during major disasters.

Finally, Craig brought up the sensitive issue of RACES. The ARRL group pointed out just how delicate an issue that is and has been out in the field. We stated that we are not interested in starting a turf war with people who prefer the RACES approach. However, there are some aspects of the RACES rules which would benefit from review and possibly modernization at this time to ensure that the RACES rules allow for sensible and efficient assistance during disasters. We said we would participate in that review, along with FEMA, and PSHS Bureau Chief Turetsky agreed that such a review would be beneficial. Be assured that no one from the ARRL suggested doing away with RACES. This won’t stop the suspicious-minded from deciding we are up to no good, but they are (as usual) wrong about that.

This was a very friendly and productive start-up meeting. I hope that it will be possible to make substantial progress towards an agreement with FEMA that has more substance than the existing one from ten years ago. Mike Corey will be the point man on working with FEMA on the MOU, with back-up consultation available from others if needed.

I asked Craig if he would be interested in giving a major address at our National Convention next year, and he said yes. Of course it is much too soon to make a commitment, yet his willingness to speak at our convention was appreciated.

Respectfully submitted,

Kay Craigie N3KN

President