

The Virgin Islands Consortium

St. Croix Amateur Radio Club Hosts Annual Field Day Activities Next Weekend

Community Center / **Published On June 19, 2023 06:41 AM /**

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Next weekend, the St. Croix Amateur Radio Club will host its Annual Field Day, an event meant to better educate the public on this fascinating – and useful – pastime.

On Saturday, June 24th and Sunday June 25th, from 10:00 a.m. to 12 noon and again from 3:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m., amateur radio operators will convene at the American Red Cross building in Castle Coakley St. Croix, to demonstrate how the network can spring into action immediately following a natural disaster, operating independently of traditional telecommunications infrastructure.

Sean Cullinan, public information officer for the St. Croix Amateur Radio Club, recalled how club members assisted the operations of the Territorial Emergency Management Agency (VITEMA) in the immediate aftermath of Hurricanes Irma and Maria. "In the days that followed Irma, we were one of the only links to many areas on St. John," Mr. Cullinan disclosed. "Our duties included coordinating communications between the Myra Keating Health Center and the U.S.S. Kearsarge relief ship including the helicopters that were making supply drops. Without amateur radio, the supply drops would have taken much longer to appear in those crucial early days and would have been far more difficult to coordinate."

Mr. Cullinan's passion for the field showed as he pushed back against the common misconception that amateur, or ham radio, is an expensive hobby. "The cost to get a license is around \$85 including the price of study materials! Once licensed you can get on the air with a handheld radio that costs as little as \$35," he explained. Admitting that some operators choose to embellish their setup with large antennas and even satellites, Mr. Cullinan argued that not even the presence of such advanced equipment meant that a lot of money was spent. "We are very resourceful at MacGyvering things in an economical way," he said, referring to a term derived from the popular 1980s and 90s television show, "MacGyver", whose character was known for his resourcefulness and ability to solve complex problems using only the basic items available to him.

Neither does one need to have any particularly deep technical knowledge to learn how to operate a ham radio setup. "If you can study for and take the drivers test in the territory it is very likely that you would be able to study for and pass the test to get a ham radio license," Mr. Cullinan explained, noting that an earlier requirement for operators to know Morse Code in order to get licensed was dropped some time ago. Mr. Cullinan also said that the St. Croix Amateur Radio Club stands ready to assist everyone wanting to join the ranks of ham radio operators. "When we have interest we have volunteered and taught classes for free to make sure anyone who wants to learn can do so," he remarked.

Mr. Cullinan urged all residents who think they might be interested in the field of amateur radio to turn out at the Annual Field Day events this weekend. As residents of the territory put the finishing touches on their hurricane preparedness plans, he reminded the public of the importance of a robust network of ham radio operators in a natural disaster. "Cell networks go down. The internet goes down. Autonomous forms of communication like ham radio that require no infrastructure will always be available, and as such, it is important that volunteers maintain that capability so it is there for all of us in a time of disaster."