

TELECOM AT PEC

A telecom session at PEC touched on a number of important topics that patrols may want to consider during the summer months.

BY DICK WOOLF

As with other national NSP programs, a telecommunications session and focus group took place at the Patroller Education Conference. Attendees reviewed a number of important topics and participated in a Q&A interchange. Here's a recap of the important points from the discussion, including some action items that deserve consideration before this ski season.

Narrowbanding: The FCC has decided that as of Jan. 1, 2013, all public-safety and business (commercial) voice radio operations must convert to narrowband. What is narrowband? It means taking up half of the channel space (radio spectrum) currently used for each channel. This will result in the creation of more channels for future use. Radios that are narrowband-capable will need to be reprogrammed. Radios that cannot be converted will have to be replaced. Narrowband and current wideband radios can talk to each other, although the audio may have low volume or be distorted. The FCC no longer permits the importation and/or sale of non-narrowband-capable radios, although there is a large used equipment market, and existing inventory may continue to be sold. There is some opposition from rural users who don't feel there is an existing channel congestion problem, and who don't want to have to pay to reprogram or replace their current equipment. There is the possibility that the date will be pushed out, or that the narrowbanding mandate will affect urban areas before rural. NSP will keep its members informed as details become known.

Radio Licensing: NSP requires its patrols to operate under either an NSP

radio license or one issued to area management. Unlicensed operation is a serious matter that can result in substantial fines. The NSP Board decided in 2007 that the national office would again process radio license applications for patrols, a service that had been suspended since 1996. All NSP radio licenses valid in 1996 have been renewed by the national office and remain in force. Since 11+ years have elapsed since it was known by national how patrols were meeting their FCC compliance responsibilities, it was decided that a survey would be prepared to get the database current again. Release of that survey has been delayed; it is now scheduled for release in fall 2009, and all patrols are requested to complete it. For temporary use at ski areas for race patrols, training and testing, avalanche and MTR courses, et cetera, each NSP division except Alaska and Professional have division-wide radio licenses. These special licenses are for portable radios only (no base stations or repeaters) and are not a substitute for permanent licensure. Patrols operating under division licenses will need to obtain their own (permanent) radio license.

Equipment to Purchase: Members and patrols buying new equipment should ensure that it is narrowband-capable, so that it can be reprogrammed if and when required. Current radio equipment is analog FM. There is no requirement to buy digital radios. The FCC is not requiring radio users to junk their current radio systems and convert to digital, though, unfortunately, some unscrupulous radio dealers have made this claim. Analog radios, re-

gardless of make and model, can talk to each other assuming the frequency and tone squelch programming is the same. Because there are no true industry standards for digital radios at the price levels patrols buy at, equipment made by one company may be unable to communicate with those of another manufacturer. This is a marketing tactic to lock you in to a particular brand or model. Don't fall into this trap.

Cell Phones and 911: Guests dialing 911 to report accidents at a ski area can result in delayed notification to the ski patrol. A good solution is to establish a dedicated "outside" line that is answered by the patrol during all operating hours. Publicize the full 10-digit number (including the area code) on signage, trail maps, lift tickets and season passes. Work on this issue now, since summer is the time that trail maps and other printed material are ordered for the upcoming season, and you'll want to get that phone number reserved now.

Sport and Family Radios: Set up a base station to monitor a special channel and tone code combination, and inform guests that you are monitoring that channel for accident reporting (again, via signage, trail maps and other ski area collateral). If you plan to do this for next fall, now is the time to prepare the text—before printed materials are ordered.

NSP Telecom Website: The rollout of the new NSP website will include a "telecom" section containing downloadable forms, narrowbanding deadline info, a FAQ page and other helpful information. +

Contact rwoolf@xtechsystems.com with questions about the NSP Telecom Program.