



The Source

FOR LOW-POWER RADIO INFORMATION

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Pescadero's emergency AM radio system *slides* into action; doubles as County information-central.

San Mateo County, California, is no stranger to disaster; but this time, when the mudslides hit, the Pescadero Emergency Preparedness Committee (PEP) was ready.



Possibly the Best View in the Country
Radio Pescadero

Beauty permeates a remote setting.

Located along the central California coast, the secluded town of Pescadero nestles on a 3-mile stretch of rolling green hills between the Pacific Ocean and the Santa Cruz Mountains in San Mateo County. This tiny town (pop.1,000) serves as a bedroom community for San Francisco, Silicon Valley and Monterey. Pristine tide pools and a historic lighthouse punctuate the seascape. Hiking trails lace redwood forests in nearby county and state parks -- tourist havens. Its remote character makes Pescadero the perfect setting for an emergency advisory radio station.

Disaster disrupts tranquility.

February 1998 brought the "worst storm in 15 years," says San Mateo County resident Lary Lawson. This dramatic episode prompted Lawson and his fellow volunteers from the Pescadero Emergency Preparedness Committee to try to devise ways to keep the community "afloat at least 72 hours, until the Red Cross, FEMA, SBA and other rescue agencies could reach the area." Flooding of Pescadero's silt-like, erosive soil caused mudslides to overrun and wash out back roads, bridges and main thoroughfares, such as the well-known Pacific Coast Highway.



Photo by Kay Nelson

Gazos Road Cut by Floodwaters

Photo by Kay Nelson



Mudslide Damaged Pope Road

Reinforcing this 1998 call-to-action, the following year heavy rains snapped locals once again into disaster mode. The sometimes "fiercely independent" people of San Mateo cleared roads with their own tractors, set up "phone-trees," stocked the high-school emergency shelter and prepared to combat power outages. But ham radio operators (often adept at getting information from point to point) could not effectively broadcast emergency information to the general public, due to the relative inaccessibility of ham frequencies to most people. "It was at this point," Lary recalls, "someone suggested getting a radio station we could use for emergency management."

Locals respond.

Spurred by the knowledge that annual rains would likely be a continuing problem, citizens of the PEP decided to research the radio-station idea and spent much energy gathering information and talking with suppliers. In this effort, says Lawson, they learned that the FCC requires emergency advisory radio stations be owned by government agencies, "So we approached San Mateo County for help." The County Information Services Department, impressed by the citizens' determination, promised to sponsor them, if the group could themselves raise most of the money for the project. Then county officials further researched the emergency advisory radio option and, tellingly, came up with the same vendor of choice: Information Station Specialists. Concurrently, the Pescadero Municipal Community Council facilitated project approval and licensing. Moreover, as testament to the project's value to the community, the Peninsula Community Foundation also agreed to fund the project. Then, recounts Lawson, "Supervisor Rich Gordon helped us secure a spot on county land..., and the County built the station for us...."



Equipment will be Vaulted with San Mateo Sheriff's Equipment

Emergency advisory radio informs.

WPPD481 1680 AM in Pescadero went on the air the first week of January 2000, just before winter storms hit – not a moment too soon, as it happens. The San Mateo County Times February 15, 2000, headline reads, "Heavy rain, winds slam County." In that article, staff writer Glenn May refers to a "30-car wreck" and "two dozen...residents...spending the night in a shelter" and the main road being closed in several places.

So far this year, Lawson relates, the Pescadero area has endured "31 days of flooding with the main road and 3 alternate routes closed due to mudslides, creek erosion and downed trees." In the beginning, Lary was the only station operator. But because of the large number of Spanish-speaking residents, he quickly enlisted a neighbor's help to translate and eventually 5 other operators and several other translators to help. Those involved in the project publicized the station by word of mouth, notices at the post office and via their Internet Service Provider Southcoast.net located at the high school/shelter. Radio messages from the new station informed locals "which way to return home based on road conditions, if and when the emergency shelter would be open, school closings and National Weather Service information." The system has a 4-day battery backup but, because power outages often last longer, will share a generator with the sheriff's department.



Volunteer Operator Larry Lawson

The community survives and prospers.

According to Lawson, most of the year, the weather is great in Pescadero, so the station is used for other community information. Essentially, it has become the "verbal bulletin board" for 3 diverse San Mateo County communities. For example: school sports events, adult classes, organization meetings and bookmobile and health clinic visits to each town are announced. Church information and interviews about happenings affecting everyone (e.g., the Year 2000 Census) are discussed. Since FCC rules dictate, no commercials, no business names or music are broadcast. Instead, points of interest for tourists are given. Lawson sums up the station's impact by saying, "This radio system is invaluable to our community. We just love it!"