

DORCHESTER

The Boston Globe

Low-tech spotter scans the skies, alert to danger

By Chris Berdik, Globe Correspondent, 2/1/2004

By day, Bill Ricker of Dorchester maintains the computer system of a Boston financial institution. But whether at work, or at home, or on the road, he always has one eye on the sky, watching for danger.

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Ricker is trained to spot cloud formations that warn of approaching severe thunderstorms, and to gauge the speed and direction of dangerous winds, the size of hail, and the possibility of flooding during heavy rains. The National Weather Service counts on Ricker and about 3,800 other volunteer "spotters" across the state to help them track the weather when things get nasty.

At 45, Ricker has been doing this for the past seven years. He'd been an active amateur "ham" radio operator before that, as are about one-third of the state's spotters, and one day found himself filling in at an emergency radio relay as a hurricane approached the Massachusetts coast.

"From that point on, I was recruited," jokes Ricker, who then attended a three-hour training where he learned such things as how to spot the "roll cloud" of a severe thunderstorm, how to estimate wind speed by what debris litters the road, and how to properly measure and report on snow accumulation.

He was then given an identification number, and his latitude and longitude were entered into the Weather Service's spotter network. While many spotters use their own wind and rain gauges, they aren't issued any gear and principally rely on their own eyes -- with the possible addition of a ruler during snowstorms. Volunteers are advised to measure snow accumulation on a raised piece of plywood set off in an open area. Ricker, though, finds his driveway works perfectly well for the task.

If a winter storm gets particularly intense, Ricker might issue a "roll call" of all the "hams" in the area and have them check in with condition updates every hour, information that Ricker then consolidates and passes on to the Weather Service. But often, the weather-watching network is a lot less formal. To check on an area of West Roxbury that's prone to wind damage, for instance, Ricker notes, "If I can get my guy down there to go and check while he's walking the dog, usually that'll do the trick."

As low-tech as things may sometimes be among the spotters, they are essential for verifying what radar images make meteorologists suspect, and for helping increase the lead time residents can be given of dangerous weather, says Glenn Field, the National Weather Service meteorologist who runs the spotter program in Massachusetts. "That man-machine mix is really the best," says Field, who adds that for severe thunderstorms, the state's current lead time averages about 17 minutes.

Ricker adds that his radio network can communicate during storms that knock out other communication systems, such as telephones. So he makes a point of trying to keep his radio

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with him wherever he goes. Basically, says Ricker, "I spot wherever I am."

The next Boston training for NWS weather spotters will be at the Museum of Science on June 7. For more information, go to www.erh.noaa.gov/box/skywarnobs.htm.

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