

The Thinking Behind the ARES Mutual Assistance Program (ARESMAP) And the Major Disaster Emergency Coordinator (MDEC)

ARRL Emergency Communications Advisory Committee (ECAC)

In a Nutshell

This is all about developing a way to help overwhelmed local ARES groups by sending resources from unaffected areas. Like many recent changes in the disaster response field, this one was born of Katrina. Many hams along the Gulf coast were preoccupied with survival and unable to function effectively, and the only way ARES could operate was with outside help.

The Big Picture

When the ARRL Programs and Services Committee (P&SC) asked us to flesh out the idea of a Major Disaster Emergency Coordinator, we began with just a rough job description. It was envisioned as an ad hoc position to be activated when needed for the task or coordinating a wide-area response. As the discussion progressed, we added details including job qualifications, regional distribution, and functional and organizational elements.

In an attempt to see how the MDEC might function when added to the existing ARRL Field Organization, we created several flow charts. It quickly became apparent that the MDEC was really only one piece of what need to be an all-encompassing program, with new concepts and terminology to make it work well.

It was also clear that it needed to be part of a unified support concept, and not another layer of bureaucracy. The new support program would have to work seamlessly at all levels.

New Concepts - New Terminology

One of the new terms presented to us was Disaster Field Team, which we expanded to ARES Disaster Field Team (ADFT) to differentiate it from other organizations' disaster field teams. It was intended to describe the national-level ARES teams that the MDEC would send into a disaster area to bolster local resources. "ARESMAT" was already being used to describe the same thing, but there was nothing to describe an overall outside support program. For that matter, no such program really existed.

For that reason, we've proposed the ARES Mutual Assistance Program. Yes, we know it looks and sounds a lot like ARESMAT (ARES Mutual Assistance Team), and it might create some initial confusion. We're proposing that the term ARESMAT be replaced with Disaster Field Team, and that ARESMAP becomes the term describing all local, regional, and national support program activities. ADFT would become the term used for all ARES field teams responding from outside a disaster area, whether through regional MOUs or from ARRL HQ.

Critical Tasks

The National ARES Database will need to be tightened and strengthened to assure that registrants are indeed qualified. This means that self-registration will need to be replaced with registration by SECs or their designees. SECs will need to be impressed with the importance of honestly vetting each applicant to ensure accuracy of information provided and their suitability for the role.

MDEC and Field Organization Orientation and Training will be essential to the success of the program. An MDEC field manual will need to be written to ensure a uniform and predictable response program across the country. Existing field organization staff will need to be educated on the concepts and new terminology.

Procedures, Guidelines and Plans will need to be drawn up to allow for a predictable and uniform response each time an MDEC is activated. Tabletop drills might also be considered to test plans and procedures.