

Technical Attachment

**Developing a Local Outreach Program**

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**Introduction**

In late 2000, a team at WFO Nashville (Old Hickory) was assembled to improve the slide show given at spotter talks. The outreach team consisted of one senior forecaster, four journeymen forecasters and the ITO. The outreach team began its work with the goal of producing a computer-based presentation with pictures from Middle Tennessee - not just the canned "Great Plains photographs" that are commonly delivered. By the following spring severe weather season the team had completed a polished 140-slide show using Corel Presentations. They also included a number of severe weather photographs contributed by residents across Middle Tennessee, but the team didn't stop there. After taking on the name "Outreach Team," the members developed a collection of topical presentations to be delivered to various groups across Old Hickory's forecast area, which consists of 42 counties in Middle Tennessee. What followed was an expansion and improvement of the WFO's existing outreach program.

The National Weather Service in Huntsville, Alabama, also began a local outreach team in early 2003. As a new WFO with developing programs, the Huntsville office team originally comprised just two members - the WCM participated at schools and Rotary Clubs in addition to his normal spotter training and preparedness safety talks, and the MIC concentrated on Rotary and Kiwanis Club presentations. Three additional outreach team members were soon added as school, marine and aviation outreach programs were begun and quickly expanded. The results of the well-planned team efforts at Nashville and Huntsville were surprising, and were achieved very quickly. Because of this, we want to share our experiences with other National Weather Service offices.

**Developing the Presentations**

When the idea of outreach was born, it was decided we would target groups outside the traditional warning preparedness circles of spotters and emergency management officials. NWS Old Hickory's outreach team would focus on civic groups and schools. The team was divided into two groups: one group would tackle the civic groups presentation, and the other would develop a slide show for high school students. Along the way, other presentation topics were addressed such as lightning safety, tornado safety, flooding, winter weather, agriculture and aviation. One presentation was developed for medical groups, another for historical societies. The service hydrologist then added his creation, and the ITO (also an amateur radio operator) developed a presentation for Amateur Radio Clubs. Finally, a presentation on unusual weather anecdotes in Middle Tennessee was added for the civic groups circuit. By the end of the first year, at least twelve topical presentations had been delivered by members of the Old Hickory outreach team, in addition to the original spotter slide show.

## **Going on the Road in Middle Tennessee and North Alabama**

The team from Old Hickory began delivering talks on October 1, 2001. It started with one goal: to visit all 42 counties in its warning and forecast area at least once by September 30, 2002. We began to make contacts with groups and organizations. Using the internet for contact information, many calls were made and e-mails were sent to potential audiences. The outreach team first targeted Rotary and Lions Clubs, Chambers of Commerce, and high school science teachers. Soon, the speaking engagements fell into place, and the team members were on their way.

Within a few months, as word-of-mouth spread, people began to call the weather office, or send e-mails, requesting a talk for their group. So many requests were received, in fact, that we had to reluctantly turn some down or rescheduled them due to over-booking. When the initial year concluded on September 30, the team had fallen short of its goal of reaching all 42 counties, but the results were still amazing: 70 events, a total audience of 4,427, and 38 counties visited (90 percent of the total). The goal of visiting all 42 counties was realized on December 3, 2002. This was in spite of the team having lost two of its six members to transfers.

Since beginning an outreach team of its own in June, 2002, and using Old Hickory's team as an example, the WFO Huntsville staff has been involved in 35 events, covering all 11 counties in its North Alabama county warning area. To improve on fiscal year 2002 outreach events, the Huntsville office developed FY2003 outreach goals. Specifically, the goals are to complete 20 school and academic-related talks and events, educating at least 500 students. Further weather education goals include working with the state of Alabama public broadcast stations in the development of a "Professor Weather" videotaped show, which will provide weather and severe weather safety education to children of all grade levels. Also planned is the mass mailing of around 5,000 weather cloud charts to all schools in North Alabama and the development of a weather explorers program at WFO Huntsville.

Other outreach events planned include two major NOAA Weather Radio (NWR) promotional events across northern Alabama which will include tuning weather radios and distributing locally-produced NWR brochures to residents, emergency managers, storm spotters, and Chambers of Commerce. Since boating and outdoor water recreation are very popular in North Alabama, WFO Huntsville will again participate in Water Safety Day in Florence in late May. Another goal involving the marine community is to provide at least two weather tours of the NWS office to the local Coast Guard auxiliaries in order to educate these groups about weather safety as related to area rivers and lakes. Other outreach activities planned include providing SKYWARN spotter and safety training to at least 30 storm spotter, SKYWARN, and amateur radio groups, and completing 20 presentations to civic, historical, and climate groups. The aviation outreach effort will include visiting all north Alabama airports and hosting an aviation customer workshop in late summer (*ed. note: the workshop was held on Saturday, August 23, with over 150 aviation customers and partners in attendance*).

## **More Outreach Ideas Discovered**

There are ways to provide outreach other than speaking engagements alone. Following are a few ideas the outreach team at Old Hickory has employed.

Letters-to-the-Editor. As in most areas, Middle Tennessee has many small town newspapers that publish at least weekly. The outreach team leader distributed numerous letters-to-the-editor which described the National Weather Service mission and operations. The letters began with a few weather facts about the paper's local area in order to “personalize” the message (and increase the likelihood of publication). A sample letter is included with this tech attachment.

Refrigerator magnets. The WCM used local funds at WFO Nashville to purchase 1,000 of these, in the shape of the state and embossed with the NWS logo, the toll free spotter number, and the office Web address. Picking up on that idea, WFO Huntsville had magnets made which highlight lightning safety and spotter training. These are also used for school outreach and other weather safety presentations.

Surf the internet. Most counties and municipalities, including chambers of commerce, have their own Web sites, and many of those contain a weather link. Webmasters can be asked to consider including a link to an NWS weather page which specifically addresses the local area weather needs. As part of our outreach efforts we aim to ensure those individuals know what is available from the NWS, including URL's, an explanation of our products, etc.

## **Conclusion**

The National Weather Service has a critical mission delivery service to perform, and it is the responsibility of local offices to accomplish that for their areas of county warning and forecast responsibility. In many ways our role is unique from the function of private weather providers, so it's important that we work to make the distinction clear. We have discovered that many people do not yet fully understand the mission and service capabilities of the modernized NWS offices. The Huntsville and Old Hickory office outreach teams have the goal of improving that understanding through direct contact. Once people fully understand how the NWS forms the basis of meteorological data collection, weather forecasting, and severe weather watch and warning dissemination for the nation, they are naturally and genuinely interested, which makes it easy to communicate our message. We have found that if our presentations include local interest - and even some entertainment value - by using old weather-related photographs, unusual weather anecdotes, and perhaps a weather cartoon or two - then all the better. We know people appreciate our presentations by the questions we are asked, the compliments we receive, and by the number of speaking engagements we have secured by word-of-mouth.

Public outreach can be one of the most rewarding and satisfying endeavors a National Weather Service employee can experience. We are not just meteorologists, hydrologists, or technicians. We serve the public and should be quick to remind the general public who we are, what we do, and who funds our agency. That means learning and practicing additional skills. People find it refreshing when an employee of the federal government knocks on their door, eager to provide a service of this nature. By doing this, the National Weather Service can further increase a positive and long-lasting reputation among the communities we serve.

### **Acknowledgments**

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## Sample Letter to the Editor

Dear Editor:

Did you know that Winchester's largest snowfall on record was 10.5 inches, measured on March 13, 1993, in what has come to be known as the "Storm of the Century?" Do you remember December 22, 1990, when the city recorded its greatest one-day rainfall - a remarkable 7.52 inches? You probably don't remember the date of April 30, 1909. During the early morning hours, an F2 tornado tore through Decherd, killing 4 and injuring 30.

These and other facts about Middle Tennessee came from the website of the National Weather Service Office located in Old Hickory ([www.srh.noaa.gov/ohx](http://www.srh.noaa.gov/ohx)). The National Weather Service is a branch of the federal government tasked with issuing weather warnings and forecasts for the protection of life and property and the enhancement of the economy. Not only can you get facts such as these, but you can also obtain the latest forecast for Franklin County, look at various surrounding radars, see if there are any warnings in effect, review every recorded tornado in the county's history, and find out which NOAA Weather Radio transmitter(s) cover your area.

Not only does the National Weather Service provide the public with weather warnings and forecasts 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, it also provides the foundation for a thriving private weather industry. Companies such as The Weather Channel and AccuWeather, as well as your local television meteorologists, rely on weather observations (including radar and satellites, surface and upper-air data nationwide) and computer-generated forecasts from the National Weather Service to produce the value-added products and services they provide. The National Weather Service accomplishes its mission on an annual budget that averages less than \$3 per U.S. citizen per year.

The more citizens understand how we carry out our critical mission of protecting life and property through improved forecasts and warnings, the better we can serve them. A representative from the National Weather Service office in your area will be happy to speak to local schools or other groups on request. Please contact meteorologist Mark Rose at [Mark.A.Rose@noaa.gov](mailto:Mark.A.Rose@noaa.gov).