

Kids’ Weather Hour at WFO Amarillo—Using NOAA All-Hazards Weather Radio as an educational tool

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1. Introduction

Most counties in the Texas and Oklahoma Panhandles are covered by NOAA All-Hazards Weather Radio (NWR) transmitters (Fig. 1), allowing for the transmission and receipt of life-saving watches, warnings and statements from the National Weather Service (NWS) Weather Forecast Office (WFO) at Amarillo, Texas. Despite the presence of these transmitters, many residents are still unaware of the capabilities of NWR. Therefore, the NWS sought to “commercialize” NWR in order to promote the radio and its associated benefits. Several years ago, WFO Amarillo convened its Marketing and Outreach Team to address this effort locally.

The Marketing and Outreach Team at WFO Amarillo had been considering ways to reach kids, to invigorate their interest in meteorology. It was proposed that NWR could be used in this effort, but that its effectiveness would be heightened if the kids could be directly involved in the process. As a result, the Kids’ Weather Hour concept was developed.

This brief manuscript will highlight the current state of the Kids’ Weather Hour program at WFO Amarillo and will identify some of the impacts on the Panhandle community.

2. What Is Kids’ Weather Hour?

Kids’ Weather Hour is a creative, educational and interactive program designed to provide a direct communication with participating students via NWR. Students learn about the weather by having their

questions answered live on-air, by one or more NWS meteorologists from WFO Amarillo. Students in the Texas and Oklahoma Panhandles are naturally curious about meteorology given that the region is a highly weather-conscious area, and Kids’ Weather Hour provides a means for them to explore their curiosity further.

Teachers learn about Kids’ Weather Hour via an informational packet that is distributed to all elementary schools in the Panhandles with NWR coverage by WFO Amarillo. Included in this packet is a letter for students to bring to their parents, thus providing a way for parents also to learn about the benefits of NWR and the Kids’ Weather Hour

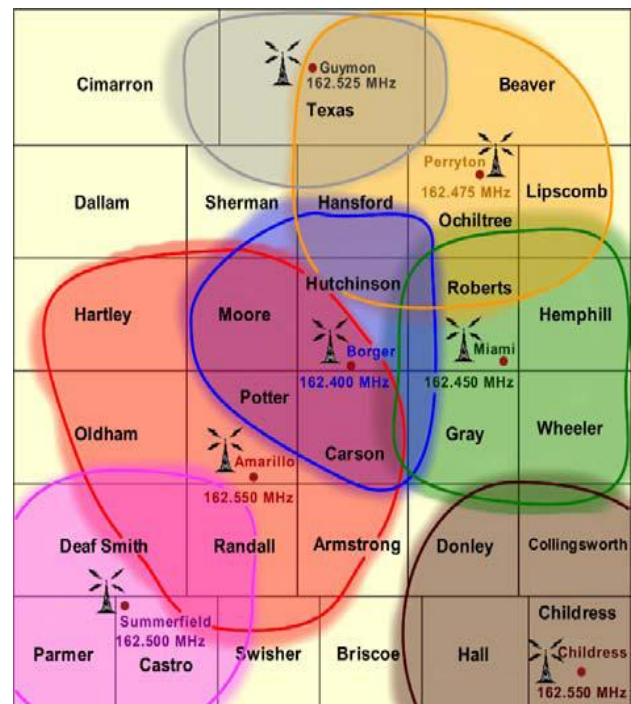


Fig. 1. NWR coverage for the Texas and Oklahoma Panhandles. Transmitters broadcasting from WFO Amarillo include Amarillo, Borger, Miami, Perryton and Guymon. The remaining two transmitters are governed by WFO Lubbock.

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program itself. Teachers may sign their class up for any Friday of their choosing, and students then prepare and submit weather-related questions to WFO Amarillo.

The program normally is conducted at 900 AM each Friday during the academic year. Routine NWR programming is suspended during this time for all transmitters, and the NWR system is put into Live Broadcast mode. WFO Amarillo forecasters answer each question, recognizing the student, teacher and school (Fig. 2). Although the broadcasted questions may only originate from one particular class, any classroom with a NWR receiver is able to tune in to the broadcast, which still allows other classes to benefit from the broadcast. The questions are answered at a level suited for the age of the students involved.



Fig. 2. John Brost answers student questions during a Kids' Weather Hour broadcast.

3. Impacts

Teacher response to Kids' Weather Hour has been overwhelmingly favorable, reporting that students love hearing their name and their question broadcast on NWR. Many teachers have become regular participants in the program and help advertise it to their colleagues by word-of-mouth. For the students, the program provides a fun and interactive way to explore the field of meteorology, and enables them to ask questions about those aspects of the field that interest them most. Additionally, the program

promotes NWR among the schools, students and their parents, who are often unaware of the full functionality and utility of owning a NWR receiver. Even the public benefits, as they are free to listen to the broadcast on their own NWR receivers.

Several partnerships have been established between WFO Amarillo and area enterprises in support of Kids' Weather Hour. During the 2006-2007 school year, BWXT Pantex committed to equipping each participating school with a NWR receiver, so that not only could the classes participate in Kids' Weather Hour, but the school would have another safety measure for receipt of future watches and warnings. In fact, some teachers have incorporated the use of NWR into their weather lessons. For several years, Wal-Mart also has provided a pair of bicycles to be awarded by raffle to two of the participating students. The presentation of the bicycles to the winning students is made at the kids' schools by a team of NWS staff.

Kids' Weather Hour has been a very successful educational tool for students across the Panhandles. Approximately 500 students and 15 schools across the Panhandles participate each year—learning about the capabilities of NWR and exploring the science of meteorology by having their own questions answered.

4. Acknowledgments

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