

Critical Commentary on the Final Recommendations of the ARRL Emergency Communications Advisory Committee

“You cannot envision the future unless you understand the past.”

Background

The ECAC “Final Recommendations” Report is flawed both in substance and by the process used to reach several recommendations and the major restructuring proposal.

Despite months of effort in framing its conclusions and proposal, little time was spent with the actual research and analysis to support its report. During the report editing process the Committee was still struggling to understand one of the very organizations it was charged to explore: The National Traffic System (NTS).

This Commentary takes issue with a number of assumptions, conclusions and recommendations in the ECAC “Final Recommendations” Report, dated November 19, 2013, as submitted to the Programs & Services Committee.

Executive Summary

Page 1: Organizational Structure and Objectives:

The statement that the “*NTS’s organization is top-down and based on its continent-wide network structure*” is not only patently untrue, but serves as the springboard for the Committee’s assumptions and conclusions which were, in turn were used to support several recommendations.

The term “top-down” from well-worn management theory hardly fits the NTS organizational structure.

First, the NTS structure is *bifurcated* between the 71 Field Organizations (local and section nets/digital stations) and the three Area Staffs (region and area nets/digital hub, and TCC managers).

Second, each Section structures its participation in the NTS to suit its own perceived needs and resources.

Third, the Area Staffs do not function on a “command and control” basis, although each operate within a set of written “terms of reference” (TOR) which guide how the elected volunteer managers operate their respective net/hubs and TCC functions.

Fourth, Headquarters staff oversees both the local/section and upper echelon NTS operations. This oversight function further disbursts the management function of the system.

The ECAC never came to grips with how and why the NTS is structured.

The statement that the “*NTS provides medium and long haul message handling for both agencies and the public*” misstates two critical and long-standing NTS objectives: the participation of local/section operators in training and in the origination and delivery of third party traffic.

The ECAC never accepted the fact that local and section nets are a critical part of the NTS.

Page 2: Training, Certification, and Accreditation:

The statement that *the “NTS in particular lacks official training materials, relying almost entirely on unvetted member produced material and on the job, trial and error learning”* repeats an oft-heard complaint from those who are apparently unable or unwilling to use “vetted” publications, such as the ARRL *Operating Manual* (10 ed., Chapter 5), The ARRL *Public Service Handbook* (1st Ed., Parts 4 and 7); and Appendix B, *Public Service Communications Manual* (PSCM), “NTS Methods and Practices Guidelines,” and several postings on the ARRL website.

From our survey of the so-called “unvetted” materials, the scope, accuracy and relative detail is consistent with these ARRL materials. The PSCM is out of date in many respects, and the scope of any revision should be assessed in relation to the materials covered in the 2012 *Public Service Handbook*.

The Report discussion on NTS training (at page 10) correctly states a needed PSCM revision, but fails to point out that there are manifold Section websites that include timely and accurate orientation and training materials in a variety of formats. Certainly ARRL could produce training *standards* and support volunteer materials development through a peer-review process, but let local and higher level initiatives, with ARRL incentives and guidance, produce materials best suited for the each locale and echelon.

ARES-NTS Integration:

Page 3: Second full paragraph:

“NTS’ legacy voice and CW nets are likely to see gradual reduction in the number of participants over time.”

The NTS leadership pointed out to the ECAC that there is a relationship between the available cadre of “participating operators” and their relative interest and active participation in the modes used by the NTS.

There is no hard evidence to support the “gradual reduction” assumption used by the ECAC. There is anecdotal evidence suggesting that former licensees are returning to the ranks in their later-years, and that public service, including joining ARES and NTS, is a motivation for them now that they have more discretionary time.

“NTSD lacks a viable Section-level component at the moment, a gap that needs serious attention.”

This statement stands in contradiction of a suspect Report statement at page 7, third paragraph, that *“...(a)t present, NTSD still depends primarily on the legacy voice nets for local delivery and origination, so more digital development work is needed at that level.”* The NTSD has a viable regional level component that relies on a cadre of appointed digital relay stations (DRS), with considerable DRS participation in many Sections, coupled with established liaisons between the section/local and regional echelons. What should have been stated in the Report is that there is a critical need for awareness of the DRS function and broader identification of the active DRS operators. The STMs need to play a key role in this effort to broaden the cadre of DRS operators and make their activities known throughout the Field Organization.

The ECAC Report call for *“more digital development work is needed at that (section/local) level”* introduces a degree of ambiguity without any explanation. Is the committee suggesting an automatic origination and delivery regime? The Committee must certainly be aware that in emergency response situations, the successful message circuit ultimately requires the skills of the proficient operator on local “legacy” nets.

Page 3: Fifth full paragraph:

“At the outset, we identified two possible scenarios – merge NTS and ARES into a single program, or create a shared supporting and/or governing body.”

Herein, lies the “problem of approach” by the ECAC. The Committee quickly came to a conclusion without finishing its analysis of the problem.

The NTS leadership is concerned that the ARES has never had a volunteer culture or organizational framework that functioned beyond nearby emergency-responses. The ECAC should have evaluated the need first for an organizational framework that could address many of the ARES issues identified in the report. It would be a rather straightforward task for such a framework to then coordinate with the NTS Area Staffs and their respective chairs, rather than attempt a cumbersome permanent “superstructure.”

Task 1. ARES and NTS Objectives and Organizational Structures

Page 7:

Second full paragraph: “Section level NTS affiliated nets have disappeared over the years, leaving large gaps in local delivery and origination capability.” While this may indeed be the case in some Field Organizations, on its face this statement creates a false assumption. There are many sections that have robust local/section nets, and from our experience, those that do not have experienced a series of Section-management leadership that have either ignored, or in some cases refuted the existence of, the NTS. The ECAC apparently avoided delving into why some section nets have “disappeared” while creating a false premise to support their conclusions. Sections with “gaps” in delivery coverage have not been without alternative resources to deliver even volume routine messages (e.g., radio-email using the Winlink 2000 system).

Page 8: NTS: First full paragraph: *“NTS is a stand-alone field organization program of ARRL, tied only loosely to what we typically think of as the ARRL Field Organization.”* The ECAC continues to hold to a notion that the NTS is not intended by ARRL policy and practices to be an integral component of the field organizations. This blind spot has, in turn, animated its bias toward what it thinks justifies a “superstructure” committee.

All ARRL written policy and procedural documents refute this bias. Field Organization leadership position descriptions are amply clear about the duties of the Section Manager, Section Traffic Manager, and the Section Emergency Coordinator with respect to message handling (including NTS). Also, See Chapter 13, ARRL *The Amateur Radio Public Service Handbook*, 1st Edition.

Page 8: NTS: Third full paragraph: *“A lack of management accountability for NTS staff except through the election and appointment processes was noted in our joint discussions.”* The ECAC may have encountered examples of performance misfeasance, but that hardly supports a conclusion that there is a lack of staff management accountability. It is indeed the election/appointment process to which these volunteer leaders are subject helps assure effective performance. The staff TOR specifically provide for both internal and external accountability, together with consequences for failure to perform required duties. See Appendix A, *PSCM*, Article Six.

Page 8: Fourth full paragraph: *“To a degree, net manager and participants are compartmentalized such that they have limited awareness of what is happening across the organization.”* This statement not only contradicts the “top-down” organization statement in the Executive Summary, it evidences a lack of knowledge about how the NTS echelons actually function and interact. There may indeed be examples of lax leadership and coordination within and across NTS echelons, but to use that stated

premise to recommend better internal communications (a sound recommendation), is hyperbole. Beyond the stated immediate recommendation, it has the effect of reinforcing a perception that some kind of “superstructure” committee will lead to better leadership or management (aside from more effective coordination).

Page 9: NTS-ARES Interface: The NTS leadership urged the ECAC to pursue the idea of a more national organizational framework (not “command-and-control” or even management) to complement the NTS structure. It was also stressed that, at present in at least one of the NTS areas, the staff is already composed of STMs, and that the TOR for that area staff includes and explicit provision to the inclusion of STM representation. None of this was even mentioned in the Report.

Task 4: Integrating the ARES and NTS Programs

Page 16:

“Both ARES and NTS face significant challenges to maintain relevancy going forward, separately and together. Neither program has the structure or capacity to solve these problems on its own.”

Such a report statement is pure hyperbole, and fabricates a premise for the “superstructure” proposal. The NTS has taken major steps over the past several years to develop, introduce, and attempt to implement a modern and effective national message-carrying system that would significantly enhance its support capability to ARES and other EMComm support programs. Traditional NTS circuits still serve an important role, particularly in orienting and training new or less experienced operators in net operations and message handling.

The Report poses a host of sound recommendations to overcome some of the “challenges” facing both ARES and the NTS. But hoisting these challenges as the basis for yet another layer of organization suggests that the existing structures are incapable to implement the recommendations. That is an absurd proposition.

There is an important ARES-NTS interface issue that the Report does mention, but then fails to accurately analyze: the need to provide and use a “common interoperable messaging layer.” There is such a circuit regime used by many in NTS, NTSD and ARES. It is the radio-email system (Winlink 2000 systems worldwide).

Pages 17-21 (including Appendices): The Joint Support Committee Approach

The JECC proposal certainly does not lack detail. Unfortunately it does lack an analytical basis if it is to be justified upon a careful reading of the Report. The NTS leadership expressed concern that the ECAC had prematurely attached itself to an overlay committee idea while still engaged in belated research and analysis. It was not until late in the Report drafting that the Committee realized each Area Staff operates under a written TOR (even though the TOR is Appendix A to the PSCM). The Report is its own evidence of this unfortunate study-approach.

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