

Crop Management

Weather Trac

Small investment offers best storm warnings



WEATHER IN HAND. Using a cell-phone-based weather provider offers you a chance to see radar in motion at any time. The big payoff for your operation may come from alerts for severe weather.

By WILLIE VOGT

SEVERE weather is sweeping across the High Plains and Western states for 2006, and if the impact is anything like it was in 2005, more tornadoes will be part of the picture. Last year, the National Weather Service recorded 975 confirmed tornadoes, of which 20 were killers. That's an improvement over 2004 when more than 1,800 tornadoes were confirmed — yet only 20 were killers that year, too.

Keeping deaths low requires a solid advance warning. Already in 2006 there have been seven killer tornadoes by press time — a big jump for the year, since those occurred in March, a month not usually associated with twisters.

Damaging weather brings more than tornadoes; it also brings severe thunderstorms carrying straight-line winds that can blow down trees and topple buildings. While it's difficult to prevent the damage a big storm can cause, you can be prepared and protect yourself when trouble hits. Several warning tools are available today, but perhaps the best is the National Weather Service's weather

Key Points

- Keeping up with local weather alerts is easier thanks to high-tech radio network.
- National Weather Service network requires the purchase of a new radio.
- Cell-phone-based weather information services are becoming more common.

network that's been enhanced to provide only local warnings.

Weather radios that came on when warnings hit and issued a tone to get your attention have been the best safety tool for remote areas. However, constant warnings from distant places that were nowhere near the farm provided a kind of "weather radio fatigue." You stop listening when the alerts don't affect you.

The National Weather Service has remedied that with its local network of 800-plus stations broadcasting on a range of FM frequencies. The newest frequencies only work with the newest weather radios — so a trip to your local radio dealer is in order.

The benefit for you is that the warnings will be much more local. Those

broadcast stations cover a 40-mile radius, which is more relevant to specific areas than in the past. NWS calls the system the Specific Area Messaging Encoding. Using a radio with SAME technology will make sure you only hear the alerts that impact your area. You can even get radios that can monitor different SAME regions and provide those alerts. Have a relative in a different county whose weather status concerns you? This service does the job.

Just look for SAME capability in any weather radio you buy.

Beyond the radio

While the weather radio has been a great tool for keeping farmers safe from storms, more high-tech tools are now available. Several services offer weather data and alerts sent directly to your cell phone. That's handy since not everyone carries a weather radio with them. Also, when you're at the back of the North 450, getting a warning of an impending storm can be essential.

Some sites we discovered, and know that farmers use, include www.my-cast.com offering local alerts and www.weather.com provided by the folks at the Weather Channel. Also, AccuWeather, a longtime provider of Web weather information, offers cell-phone alerts at wireless.accuweather.com. Each site has its own pricing for different services.

The key to making these services work is a newer phone with access to Internet connectivity. Your carrier will have more information on that. If you've been thinking of getting a new cell phone, check out the pricing on these services. Web access for a cell phone can be pricey since most companies build pricing by the amount of data that comes into (or goes out of) the phone.

Tracking weather doesn't have to mean a big bill. You can talk to your cellular provider about an "unlimited" plan that offers all the data you want for a fixed price. That's usually about \$49.95 a month, depending on the plan. Keeping informed these days — no matter how — can save lives.

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College students participate in national weather-forecasting competition

THOSE happy-talking meteorologists you like to watch on the late news before bed have a tougher job than many folks think. Most don't simply read the National Weather Service feed for the region with a pretty map-in-motion behind them. Instead, they pore over data from NWS and other sources to try to offer a very local and accurate forecast.

Today's potential future Weather Channel stars could be testing their mettle in a national forecasting contest that pushes their skills to the limit. The National Collegiate Forecasting Contest is a teaching tool for those fledgling meteorologists that challenges them by offering up a series of cities over the course of several months. In each case, the college teams then provide their best look at a potential forecast. Each team is then judged on their ability to accurately forecast conditions, and their work is checked against what actually happened.

"There are 35 schools and 1,000 students involved in the competition," says John Nielsen-Gammon, Texas state climatologist. "They are finding that it's very difficult to be accurate on a forecast."

Students work a specific "forecast cycle" for a certain area of the country. They work with the data provided and develop their forecasts. "Students will work on these forecasts, and they start believing they know what's going on and they get confident," Nielsen-Gammon remarks. "Then they get a confidence breaker where their forecast is nothing like actual conditions."

The students know what areas of the country will be included in the forecasting test when they start. Each week brings a different town to evaluate. They gather the information, look over the data and, in essence, take their best shot at predicting the weather. Then they let nature take its course.

It's that kind of testing that makes for better meteorologists. The Web site for the contest — www.ems.psu.edu/NFC/#current — is hosted by Pennsylvania State University. You can check out how your favorite school has done — once you learn the code — by checking out the site regularly.

The codes for each school are at the site. Also, by the time you read this, the results for the 2005-06 school-year event should be available.