Laughlin FD readies new comm. system

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12/8/2011 - **LAUGHLIN AIR FORCE BASE, Texas** -- The Laughlin fire department's new emergency mobile satellite communications system is set to go live as soon as a contract plan is settled on in the coming days.

The new system will provide first responders a better means of distributing information during a major crisis off base.

"This system will be a big leap forward," said Craig Wilgus, 47th Civil Engineer Squadron fire chief. "It is like a wireless network that lets you go anywhere in the world and beam data to the base."

The new system, which was installed in the fire department's command vehicles, uses a satellite dish to transmit data and voice by civilian satellites over a virtual private network similar to how internet phones and multiplayer video games work, Wilgus said.

It is operated by a command unit, which slides out from the back of the vehicle. While larger than other commercially available units, it is simpler to setup, he said. Smaller units require more time and monitoring to work while this unit requires only a couple button pushes before you have a signal.

"It is like having a news reporter on the scene," said David Isbell, 47th CES assistant chief of fire prevention. "We will be able to talk in real time."

The current system used during emergencies, such as plane crashes, involves cell phones and radios that have proven unreliable in the field, said Wilgus. Their coverage rarely goes beyond the roads, making communication with the Emergency Operations Center spotty at best.

The new system will give those operating in the field near perfect coverage, said Isbell. And allow for rapid updates from the incident commander to be fed to the EOC, increasing the speed and accuracy of the information gathering process.

Past experiences have shown the need for the new system, said Wilgus. In nine years of service here, he has responded to three plane crashes and lost radio and cell phone communications each time.

"In Dec. 2005, a T-38 crashed 36 miles away outside of Brackettville, Texas. We only had direct line of sight or vehicle-to-vehicle radio communications at the scene," he said. "We had to come back to the road to get data out."

In the same incident, time was lost trying to determine the whereabouts of the instructor and student pilot in the crash due to poor communications not only with Laughlin units, but with civilian and federal response teams aiding in the recovery, said Isbell. Hours were spent searching for the student pilot and instructor when it was discovered they both had already been found by Val Verde County sheriffs and Kinney County Emergency Management Services.

No one at the scene could get a clear signal out. The satellite system would allow not only Laughlin units access to fast and efficient communications, but supporting units from the surrounding communities as well by plugging their computers and phones into the command unit, said Wilgus.

"We know it works and I'm hoping to see this on all Air Force vehicles," Wilgus said. "Dependable communications means being able to track the injured, their initial care and recovery from an incident."

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Comments

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