

# Methow Valley News - Strong signals, April 4, 2019

APRIL 3, 2019 BY MARCY STAMPER



*Photo by Marcy Stamper*

Methow Valley Communications District technician Sandy Sanderson adjusts a TV antenna in Twisp.

## *Communication District carries more than broadcast TV*

Most winters, Sandy Sanderson makes about four snowcat trips to repair equipment on mountain summits to keep TV, radio, internet and emergency communications up and running.



Some winters are so harsh that Sanderson and fellow technician Paul Brown have had to abandon a repair trip. “I’ve buried our Polaris Ranger track vehicle in the snow and had to use a winch to get it out,” said Sanderson. In the past, when a snowmobile got stuck, Sanderson would snowshoe down to the valley and retrieve the snow machine in the spring.

The communications district, a special taxing district of Okanogan County, has a license for TV broadcasts. The district also rents space to radio stations, Okanogan County emergency services, and internet, said Becky Studen, the district’s secretary. The district maintains four mountain-top sites — in addition to McClure Mountain near Twisp, there are two sites on Goat Mountain near Pateros and one on Grizzly Mountain in Mazama.

Signals from Spokane are transmitted first to Goat Mountain, which, at almost a mile high, has a good line-of-sight to the Spokane transmitters, said Sanderson. The Goat towers then send signals to McClure, which beams them to Grizzly.

In the summer, Sanderson and Brown visit the mountain sites several times a month to do maintenance that can minimize the need for trips in the winter, said Sanderson. “You wouldn’t have NPR if we didn’t go up there in the middle of winter,” said Brown.

“It’s always a nice trip — you get to see some nice stuff. That’s why I do it,” said Sanderson.

Because there’s no road, Grizzly is the most difficult to get to — it can only be reached on foot or by helicopter. Sanderson and Brown normally hike in, but not if there’s more than 4 inches of snow. The technicians can drive to the other sites.

“It’s a lot tougher coming down from Grizzly — your knees take a pounding. There’s so much loose rock that you can be picking your way down and suddenly be sitting down,” said Sanderson.

Sanderson, who calls himself “an old analog guy,” got his start working on radar systems in the U.S. Air Force more than 60 years ago. Brown, who handles the digital side, has engineered ways to monitor the equipment remotely — at least to read meters and see if the lights are on. If there’s no signal, it may be something the district can fix, but often it’s an interruption in the broadcast from Spokane. Before digital diagnostics, technicians sometimes made the trip only to find they hadn’t brought the right tools.

## **Digital TV, radio**

The Methow district provides signals from Brewster to Mazama. It transmits nine Spokane TV channels — one CBS, one ABC, two NBC, two Fox, and four PBS — and 15 radio stations. The district also has a license for its own local TV channel, which it hopes will be broadcasting by the end of the year, said Bill Tackman, who’s served on the communications district board for a dozen years.



The arrangement is so rare that many people don't understand that to get nine digital TV channels, all they need is a basic antenna, said Studen. Brown and Sanderson will help people site and orient the antennas and set up their digital TV to scan for a signal.

When the TV district started up in the 1960s, it ran solely on generators. The powerline was built in the late 1970s. Today, the district has a back-up propane generator for TV, radio and internet. Cell phone companies and the county have their own generators.

That's a big upgrade from the three wooden power poles and antennas cobbled together by a bunch of locals half a century ago, said Sanderson. "It was the only way to get radio or TV in the Methow, unless you wanted to wrap your head in tin foil and go to the top of McClure," said Tackman.

The communications district holds permits with the U.S. Forest Service for the four mountain-top sites, which allow them to rent their infrastructure to other users. Tenants include K-Root, Spokane Public Radio and the Methow Valley School District. The Okanogan County Sheriff, Twisp and Winthrop police, and Aero Methow Rescue Service all use the sites. County snowplows, ski-trail groomers with Methow Trails, and Forest Service employees also rely on the repeaters for radio communications.

After the Billy Goat Mountain site burned in 2015, the communications district got a temporary license to broadcast from another location. "We're required to keep the signal going," said Studen.

## **Not on people's radar**

Some 3,600 property owners in the district received their annual \$20 bill last month. Last year, 2,750 of them paid, said Studen. Many people apply for an exemption because they don't watch TV or don't get a signal. But the money also supports radio, cell phones, internet and emergency services, she said. Others don't understand that the bill is separate from their property-tax bill and isn't paid by the bank that holds their mortgage.

"Usually people don't realize all that. Once they do, they're willing to support it for \$20," said Studen.

The Methow district converted to digital and merged with the district for Brewster and Pateros six years ago. The district actually lowered the annual rate, from \$35 to \$20, about 10 years ago. The district may raise the rate by \$10 next year to keep up with rising expenses, said Studen.

The district's operating budget, which pays for four part-time salaries, power, equipment upgrades and repairs, and the Forest Service contracts, ranges from \$94,000 to \$100,000 a year, said Studen.

Okanogan County has one other TV district, which covers the eastern and northern parts of the county.

✓ The county commissioners appoint the communications district board.