



## **CASE STUDY:**

### UNCW uses SkyTerra Communications Satellite Phones to Prepare for Future Emergencies

#### **The Situation**

Like all universities, the University of North Carolina Wilmington (UNCW) is responsible for the safety of its students, faculty, staff and visitors while they are on campus grounds. An important component of safety is being able to stay in constant contact with public safety officials on campus as well as federal, state and local officials who can provide the university with support during an emergency. After seeing the damage that severe hurricanes such as Hurricane Katrina can cause to communication systems and the congestion that can occur on terrestrial landlines following an incident like the Virginia Tech shootings, UNCW began looking for ways to update its emergency communications plan.

#### **The Challenge**

UNCW needed a reliable communications solution that would enable officials to stay in touch during emergencies when terrestrial service is damaged or congested.

#### **The Solution**

The University found its solution with SkyTerra Communication's MSAT G2 push-to-talk satellite phones.

"The number one reason we selected the MSAT G2 phone was because of its portability," said Stan Harts, UNCW's Director of environmental health & safety. "Having *mobile* satellite communications available during an emergency is extremely important because it allows officials to carry their satellite equipment with them and communicate no matter where they are located."



*UNC Wilmington's Center for Marine Science*

UNCW also liked the fact that the North Carolina Division of Emergency Management (NC DEM) and all county emergency management agencies in North Carolina are using SkyTerra's satellite service. UNCW was able to join the NC DEM's satellite communications talkgroup and, with the push of a button, listen to regional and county emergency management conversations — allowing university officials to quickly get updates on nearby communities.

"By joining the talkgroup, we can monitor what's happening in the surrounding counties and make more informed decisions about re-opening the campus or keeping it closed following a major disaster," said Suzanne Blake, UNCW's emergency management coordinator. "For instance, while the UNCW campus might be in good shape following an emergency, if the counties around the school are hit hard, we'd keep the school closed to keep students, faculty and staff from traveling in dangerous conditions."

It is also critical that UNCW inform parents and students about the status of campus activities during an emergency.

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By providing the Marketing and Communications Department with a phone, UNCW is able to contact the local media and relay important information to parents, students and the general public during an emergency.

UNCW currently has four MSAT G2 phones located throughout its campus. One is located at the UNCW police department, one in the Chancellor's office, one in the Environmental Health & Safety (EH&S) department and one in the Marketing and Communications department. The portability of the phones allows each of these groups to take the phones off campus if necessary.



*UNC Wilmington Undergraduate Research*

The University has trained more than a dozen school officials and employees in each office to ensure there is always someone available who knows how to operate the phone in case of an emergency. Additionally, UNCW EH&S conducts monthly inspections of the phones and reviews operations of the phones with key campus officials on a regular basis. Use of the phones is also included in campus emergency exercises and drills.

### **Satellite Communications in the Future**

A university's ability to stay in touch with officials in the surrounding area is crucial to safeguarding students, faculty and staff during a disaster.

"We plan to use the MSAT G2 satellite phones as a primary method of communication during severe hurricanes and other large-scale emergencies that affect the campus," said Blake. "During an emergency, cellular lines are often congested. The satellite phones will allow UNCW officials and emergency responders to communicate with each other as well as with county and state responders, contractors and disaster recovery personnel."