

Iowa Farmer Today

National Weather Service offers training to spot risk

By Steph Leonard

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A shaggy wall cloud hangs below a larger-diameter, likely slower-rotating cloud which is left of a dense precipitation shaft.

Image courtesy Patrick Skinner/Comet MetEd

I'm betting most of you reading this publication are weather watchers — checking the local forecast a few times a day, factoring that information into your upcoming plans, and keeping an eye on the sky when forecasters project storms.

We're heading into spring's wild weather season with its potential for severe thunderstorms, wind and tornadoes at the same time we'll spend more time outside working, in recreation and at kids' activities, so now is the right time for a refresher on storm hazards, what to look for and how to respond.

Last spring, with this transitional weather in mind, I signed up for storm spotter training through my local National Weather Service office, the NWS Quad Cities Storm Spotters.

The National Weather Service sponsors SKYWARN, a program made up of thousands of volunteers across the U.S. who have taken SKYWARN training. This training is provided several ways: face-to-face by local forecasters, through online modules, or a combination of in-person and online, depending on the requirements of each local NWS weather forecast office. (A list of local NWS offices and contacts is available at bit.ly/3tnJptP).

The SKYWARN spotter training online has two units, Role of the SKYWARN Spotter, which covers what and how to communicate to a local NWS office while staying safe and aware, and SKYWARN Spotter Convective Basics, which covers basics of thunderstorm development, storm structure and identifying potential severe weather.

While the training module notes that it takes about two hours to complete these units, I took my time, spending extra time going through the impressive array of images and photos showing features of storm systems covered in the Convective Basics unit.

To be clear, SKYWARN storm spotters are not storm chasers, rather spotters relay real-time reports to local NWS forecast offices of conditions they're observing on the ground — this is called “providing ground truth” — that can help forecasters make decisions on getting NWS warnings out to the public.

Spotter networks have been around since the early 1940s, when around 100 loosely organized “networks” were located near U.S. ammunition plants to warn of hazardous lightning and inform decision making. Since the NWS SKYWARN program was established in the 1970s, the number of trained spotters has grown to 350,000 to 400,000 trained volunteers.

The NWS encourages “anyone with an interest in public service to join the SKYWARN program. Volunteers include police and fire personnel, dispatchers, EMS workers, public utility workers and private citizens. Individuals affiliated with hospitals, schools, churches and nursing homes or who have a responsibility for protecting others are encouraged to become a spotter.”

But the classes and online training aren't exclusive to those who wish to volunteer as spotters. Anyone with an interest in weather, or who wants to learn about storms, or who wants to learn more to ease their fear of storms, are welcome and encouraged to attend.

One of the most important concepts emphasized in the training is safety.

The first online unit, Role of the SKYWARN Spotter, reinforces the “ACES” concept — an acronym for Awareness, Communication, Escape Routes and Safe Zones — which includes guidelines used by emergency management personnel to remain safe in any situation.

- Awareness means constantly observing the situation around you, being aware of potential hazards and possible outcomes so you can make decisions to minimize those risks;
- Communication is about relaying your whereabouts to others on a regular basis and having multiple lines of communication available to keep yourself and others safe;
- Escape routes are clear paths to a safe zone that you should identify from wherever you are, and that will allow you to get to a safe zone in time to protect yourself;
- Safe Zones or shelters are areas where you're protected from the hazardous condition, either to shelter in place or be completely away from the hazardous event.

Remembering ACES wherever you go can increase your safety in severe weather scenarios.

In-person and virtual spotter SKYWARN training opportunities are now available in March and April through local NWS offices. Classes typically last around two hours. There is no age requirement, but the NWS suggests those aged 10 and up are most likely to get the most out of class.

I plan to take advantage of in-person training that's available this month in communities near me. It will help me become more aware of local storm-spotting efforts and SKYWARN activities in my area and will be a good refresher to last spring's online training.

Whether you're simply an interested weather watcher or considering becoming a SKYWARN Spotter for the NWS, I encourage you to check out the online spotter training course at bit.ly/3KdoFbN. It involves setting up a free user account through Comet MetEd.

It's a worthwhile investment of two hours that I expect will pique your interest in what the sky offers up in the coming weeks and provide important clarification for staying safe in severe weather.

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