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National network of volunteer weather observers snowballs

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By CoCoRaHS

Dana Brackney of Boone, N.C., is part of a national network of weather observers in 39 states who measure rain, snow and hail every day.

By [Doyle Rice](#), USA TODAY

As Tropical Storm Fay dumped record amounts of rain across Florida in August, hundreds of volunteer weather observers tracked the storm, feeding valuable data to forecasters at the National Weather Service. The observations helped the weather service keep track of life-threatening flooding as the storm inched across the state.

The observers are part of a fast-growing national network of about 12,500 volunteers in 39 states who measure rain, snow and hail each day, then record the amounts in an online database. The project, called the Community Collaborative Rain, Hail & Snow Network (CoCoRaHS), which began in Colorado, is in its 12th year.

"It's a great program that I'm passionate and excited about," says Melissa Griffin, co-state coordinator for the project in Florida. She says that even though the program was introduced

in Florida just last year, 400 observers have already signed up across the state. "By having a dense network of dedicated observers, Florida CoCoRaHS was able to provide invaluable information during Tropical Storm Fay," Griffin wrote in an online report about the storm.

"Folks in Florida did a great job of measuring and reporting" a week of heavy rains, says project founder Nolan Doesken of Colorado State University-Fort Collins. Fay crossed Florida a record four times, killing 14 people and causing hundreds of millions of dollars in damage.

Henry Reges, the project's national coordinator, also of Colorado State University, says volunteers include "anyone who can devote five minutes a day to take a rain-gauge measurement and post the info online." Volunteers also must purchase a rain gauge, which costs about \$25.

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Reges says the volunteers act as a "farm team" for the more established National Weather Service cooperative observer program, which has 11,000 volunteers who take a variety of measurements. That program started in 1890. The weather service also sponsors the CoCoRaHS program.

Volunteers not only measure excessive rainfall but "provide vital information in monitoring drought conditions," says Texas assistant state coordinator Bill Runyon of Martindale, Texas. "We provide a lot of useful information about precipitation for the scientific community."

Reges says the information is used by hydrologists, emergency managers, city utility agencies, insurance adjusters, mosquito-control officers, ranchers, farmers, recreation agencies and teachers. "We're not just about data; 50% of the network is geared towards education," he says.

Says volunteer Dana Brackney of Boone, N.C., a self-described weather geek: "It's addictive. It's become a regular part of my day, and I love it."

Two states — Idaho and Ohio — have joined CoCoRaHS so far this year. The program hopes to expand into Massachusetts, Vermont, Arkansas and West Virginia this year, with a nationwide goal of 20,000 observers by 2010. Volunteers continue to be needed "everywhere and anywhere," Doesken says.

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