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Small-town radio

Until about a year ago, visitors scanning for radio stations along the Dixie County coastline used to be able to pick up a few FM stations, but the signal quality was inconsistent.

But once Jimmy Brooks started fiddling around with some electronic gear in the dining room of his fish camp, finding a radio station got a lot easier in the Dixie County coastal community.

Brooks installed a 90-foot radio tower outside his back door and converted his dining room into a broadcast booth for a 100-watt radio station. When WZRO-LP signed on the air for the first time a year ago, it became one of the first low power FM radio stations licensed by the Federal Communications Commission and the only radio station devoted exclusively to the coastal community.

"My dad, Paul W. Brooks, started bringing me down here from Georgia to fish when I was a kid and I just loved it," Jimmy Brooks said.

Working with other residents of the little fishing village, Brooks, who also lives part-time in Valdosta, Ga., first formed the Suwannee River Fishing Association to encourage others to do what his dad had done for him - taking children fishing as a way to keep them out of trouble. so they can grow into productive citizens.

When the FCC began authorizing low power radio station licenses in January 2000 specifically to serve places like Suwannee, Brooks applied for one of the licenses through the association. The federal commissioners decided that small, local stations may be better able to serve community interests and provide access to public airwaves than large stations located many miles away.

Some restrictions apply to the low power stations, like the requirement that they remain noncommercial, operate at 100 watts or less and broadcast from a tower no more than 100 feet tall. Officials estimated that the LPFM stations would only reach listeners within 3 miles of the tower, but with the flat coastal terrain, Brooks has had listeners as far away as Cedar Key - a distance of 15 miles.

The noncommercial requirement for the stations means that operators have to find underwriters - local businesses willing to give the stations money in return for being mentioned on the air, but without a pitch for any specific product or service.

Another of the original LPFM stations operates out of a metal shed across the street from Union County High School in Lake Butler. WUCR-FM station co-founder Paul Lewis said his station's focus is all things related to the small county - especially its high school athletics.

"This is a chance for us to provide a community service for our county," Lewis said. "With these small stations, you can get things on the air that you would not get anywhere else."

For WUCR, that means live broadcasts of high school football games. For the listeners of WZRO in Suwannee, right now that means prerecorded segments of local news, live broadcasts when needed, such as during the recent tropical storms, and eventually the addition of fishing reports and possibly even remote broadcasts.

"This is my hobby," Brooks said. "Some guys jump out of planes, some guys race cars. I wanted to build a radio station and it can help my community."

Brooks said his experience as a Sunday morning DJ at a 1,000-watt AM station when he was a teenager along with his knowledge of electronics helped him keep start-up costs down.

Brooks estimated it cost \$10,000 to get the station started and only a couple of hundred dollars a month to keep it operating, about what his underwriters contribute.

"Everybody here is a volunteer - nobody gets paid," Brooks said. "The money goes to the power company and for the music and things like that. Most of this is automatic so we don't need a staff and without a staff, we don't need a payroll and without a payroll, nobody can get jealous of what anyone else is making. This is just fun radio."

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