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Sci|Tech

THE BATTALION

Thursday, January 24, 2002

Lightning prediction system installed

By Sarah Szuminski and
Mandi Vest
THE BATTALION

Lightning is a beautiful, natural phenomenon, but can be destructive and life threatening. A&M officials decided to install a lightning prediction system because of the large campus and many outdoor activities. Christopher Meyer, director of A&M's Environmental Health and Safety Department, said lightning is the leading cause of death in the natural disaster category in the United States. Because of the amount of outdoor activities on and near campus, university officials formed a task force to recommend a lightning prediction system. The new system, funded primarily by the Division of Student Affairs and Finance, cost \$45,000. The sensors are designed to examine conditions and predict lightning within a two-mile radius, large enough to cover the entire campus.

Meyer said Tom Reber at Rec Sports came to him with the idea. The football team was using the Student Recreation Center because of possible lightning storms, when one of the coaches noticed there were people in the outdoor pool. He told Rec officials that the lightning detector

had signaled. Reber then recognized the need for a lightning prediction system across campus.

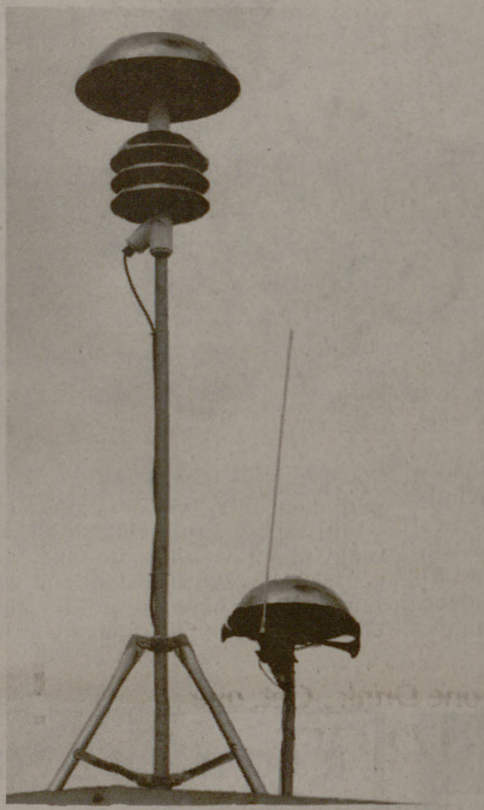
The company that makes Thor Guard Lightning Prediction System has installed the system in thousands of golf courses, military installations, universities, swimming pools and airports. It has already been installed at many universities including Texas Christian University and The University of Georgia, Meyer said. The sensors and alarms were installed at A&M before Christmas break and were initially tested last Thursday.

Thor Guard monitors a developing storm by detecting electrostatic buildup in the atmosphere. If the hazard of lightning reaches a preset level, alarms sound before an actual strike happens. The system has the ability to predict random bolts, which can occur without any sign of a storm.

When the alarm is sounded, students are advised to cease any university-related outdoor activities and take shelter and are also encouraged to discontinue use of cellular phones and radios. "It will be an interesting test in the next few years to see if people have faith in the system," Meyer said.

One anticipated problem is the possibility of students not trusting the computers' accuracy and ignoring the warnings, Meyer said. Because the electrostatic sensors read invisible signs in the atmosphere, the sirens may sound at a time when little or no clouds appear in the sky. Conversely, students may be able to hear thunder or see lightning in the distance while the alarm remains inactivated.

Two sensors, one at the Rec Center and one at the golf course, send the signal to the 11 alarms across campus.



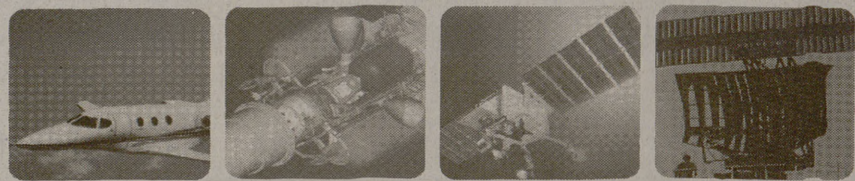
ALISSA HOLLIMON • THE BATTALION

Lightning sensors and horns are now located on top of the A&M golf course club house.



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