

## Storm chasers

Texas A&M Mobile Severe Storms Data Acquisition Team searches out the big ones

By Amelia Williamson  
THE BATTALION

Most people try to avoid getting stuck in the middle of severe weather, but members of the Texas A&M Mobile Severe Storms Data Acquisition group (TAMSSSDA) are constantly searching for severe storms to chase.

Kevin Robert Walter III, an atmospheric sciences graduate student and co-coordinator of TAMSSSDA, said group members learn about severe weather, try to predict when and where it will occur and then attempt to intercept severe thunderstorms and tornadoes. While chasing severe storms, TAMSSSDA members hope not only to gain further knowledge and a better understanding of the inner-workings of severe storms, but also to aid the National Weather Service in its mission to protect lives and property by issuing timely and accurate severe weather warnings, Walter said.

"(TAMSSSDA members) evaluate the atmospheric conditions in the hopes that conditions are right for the formation of severe thunderstorms," said Gordon May, a junior environmental geosciences major and TAMSSSDA member. "If (the conditions are right), we go out and try to intercept these storms so that we can gain a better understanding of what makes them work."

The group chases storms throughout the academic year, but the most chases occur between the months of March and May, said Jennifer Salato, a junior meteorology major and one of the forecasters for the group.

"If there's decent and predictable severe weather to be had in the Southern Plains, we'll chase it," Walter said. "Between the fickleness of Mother Nature and the academic commitments of our club members, we average about one full-fledged chase per month."

The group is responsible for predicting when and where storms are likely to develop, Salato said.

"We have six forecasters and each forecasts for a week," said Jason Sippel, atmospheric sciences graduate student and co-coordinator for TAMSSSDA. "This schedule continues through the fall and spring semesters, so someone is always on the ball watching out for potential chase-able storms."

The group spends most of its time chasing supercells, which are violent storms that are likely to produce large hail and tornadoes, May said. When a forecaster thinks that the weather in an area is favorable for severe storms to develop, he or she alerts the other members.

"The group chases whenever operations have been called by a forecaster," Salato said. "It is the duty of the forecaster for the week to call operations if the weather set-up looks promising for



PHOTO COURTESY OF TAMSSSDA

TAMSSSDA team members Jason Sippel, Rich Otto and Chris Daniels survey a severe thunderstorm in western Oklahoma on March 27, 2004. This storm went on to produce three short-lived tornadoes.

severe storms."

TAMSSSDA forecasters have predicted that weather conditions in northern Oklahoma will be favorable for severe storms this Thursday. Operations have been called for members to prepare to head out to Oklahoma on Thursday in hopes of chasing some good storms, Walter said.

Before the chase, group members run numerical models and check data to find the position where severe storms are likely to hit. They then pile into cars and drive toward the target area of the predicted storms. Two to 15 members go on each chase, and the group will drive as far as Oklahoma and southern Kansas to chase a storm, Walter said.

The people who stay behind to give the group updates on storm

movement and help them to decide which way to go are called "nowcasters," Sippel said. The nowcasters use satellite, radar and surface data to track storms and advise the group members who are out chasing the storm where to go.

When the chasers find a storm, they follow it from a safe distance, observing and recording what they see. The storm chasers usually stay a couple of miles away from the storm so they can observe the whole structure of the storm. They do, however, sometimes get as close as a mile to a storm if they want to get an up-close look at it.

See Storms on page 10

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