Building Fire Safety Systems

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From the members
Public service campaign introduces mascot for lightning safety
by Kim Loehr

Lightning is a serious and life-threatening weather phenomenon, responsible for multiple deaths, injuries and massive property destruction throughout the U.S. Unfortunately, lightning is also the most under-recognized weather hazard, often commanding little attention from the public and the media.

In 2001, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the National Weather Service launched an annual Lightning Safety Awareness campaign to increase public awareness of the dangers of lightning. Several members of NOAA’s Lightning Safety Awareness Team, including the Lightning Safety Alliance (LSA), the Lightning Protection Institute (LPI) and StruckByLightning.org have collaborated in creating a television public service announcement (PSA) to educate children about the dangers of lightning and promote the 2007 campaign slogan, “When Thunder Roars, Go Indoors.” The PSA introduces the mascot, “Leon the Lightning Lion,” a cartoon character designed to spread lightning safety and preparedness messages to the public.

“Leon the Lightning Lion is a colorful mascot designed to help kids understand the dangers of lightning and learn how to protect themselves,” says Bud VanSickle, executive director of the LPI. “Lack of awareness is a common factor in lightning injuries and deaths. Leon is a kid-friendly character, similar to ‘Smokey the Bear,’ McGruff or ‘Sparky’ the Dalmatian. His job is to teach children simple, easy-to-remember safety tips for lightning season,” explained VanSickle.

“Lightning is usually the most dangerous and frequently encountered weather hazard that people experience each year,” said John Jensenius, warning coordination meteorologist, for the National Weather Service. “Too often people wait too long before seeking safe shelter from a thunderstorm and find themselves caught outside in a very dangerous and sometimes deadly situation.” Jensenius has tracked statistics over a 30-year period...
(ending in 2004), which reveal that lightning remains the second greatest storm-related killer in the U.S. -- second only to flooding. "Because lightning is such an underrated killer, NOAA’s Lightning Safety Awareness Team is constantly challenged to create new tools to help educate both children and adults about lightning and its dangers," explained Jensenius, who was awarded the National Weather Association's 2005 Public Education Award and more recently, a Department of Commerce Silver Medal in 2006.

In addition to the PSA, the NOAA Lightning Safety Awareness Team is waging a full-scale campaign to educate children about lightning safety with materials that include: Leon posters, safety stickers, teacher tools and a website kid’s page, featuring an interactive computer lightning safety game.

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