

KEYS Sunday

JUNE 3, 2007

Real Estate • Business • Lifestyle

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VOL. 2, NO. 30

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PUBLISHED BY:

FLORIDA KEYS
KEYNOTER
KEY WEST
KEYNOTER
THE REPORTER



Salt, sand and humidity take toll on electronics

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cover story

Our climate is tough on electronics

Protect your gadgets from salt, sand, humidity

By DICK CONKLIN
Keys Sunday contributor

OK, I'm guilty as charged. Yes, I'm one of those Fresh Air Fiends who leaves the windows open until the temperature and humidity both approach 90. I love working at my desk next to a sliding door that is open most of the time, allowing gentle tropical breezes to blow across my keyboard and display screen. My ceiling fan helps out on the worst days and my low electrical bill is a source of pride and joy.

But I have friends — some of whom are experts in things electrical — who tell me that I'm slowly destroying my computer and other gadgets. They say those tropical breezes are laden with two elements that slowly corrode sensitive circuitry — water and salt.

Sometimes I think they may be right. Maybe there's a reason why my GPS, VHF radio, CD player, computer CD drive, and home entertainment system have all gone dead — without ever getting wet.

So I called our local experts in things electrical, the Florida Keys Electric Cooperative. The FKEC's Rebecca Callahan Newman acknowledged that salt and moisture take their toll at all levels, from the high-voltage lines that run along the Overseas Highway to tiny circuitry with exposed connectors.

"The salt builds up on our pole-top equipment during droughts," she said. "You can really hear the buzzing that results if you drive close to a neighborhood pole or along U.S. 1 in Marathon, where the power structures are closer to the highway."

Salt causes two kinds of problems. Even when dry it can conduct electricity, causing current to "short out" normally open connections. When wet, salt has even higher conductivity. But it also has a corroding effect — making things rust faster than they would in a non-salty environment. Anyone who owns or works on boats knows what salt water can do.

FKEC Member Service Supervisor Shawn Mulholland said I should just close up the house and crank up the AC.

"In a nutshell, we suggest that when it comes to computer life, you choose between paying for and living with air conditioning or paying for and living with computer problems. The best environment for computer equipment is dry, cool air — all the time. Most often, the humidity — more than the salt — causes

On the Web

The following Web sites provide more information:

- ◆ Geek Squad: www.geeksquad.com/
- ◆ Humidity and Computers: www.tpcug.org/newsletter/nl_2001/july2001/humidity.htm
- ◆ PC Guide to Humidity: www.pcguides.com/care/care/gen/envHumidity-c.html

problems when computers are in a tropical environment," he said.

"Salt air oxidizes electronics and electrical equipment faster than non-salt exposed air," he added. "The best way to protect electronics would be to cover them when not in use as is done with boat electronics."

Many plug-in components, such as wireless modems, memory sticks and computer cables, come with protective caps to keep out dirt, humidity and salt when they are not in use. Use them.

Even more dangerous than humidity itself is the possibility

of condensation. If you wear glasses or know someone who does, you've seen what happens when you have been in cool air and then go into a warm, humid environment: the glasses "fog up." This happens with electronic equipment as well. For example, if your hard disk platters are moist when you turn them on, you risk destroying the drive. The problem can be avoided if you give the condensation enough time to evaporate before turning on an electronic device.

Next we talked to the folks

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Watch out for the other kind of surge

By DICK CONKLIN
Keys Sunday contributor

After Hurricane Wilma, I bet you think you know all about storm surges, right? Not so fast. A different kind of surge, such as the kind caused by a nearby lightning strike, could fry your TV or computer.

According to Shawn Mulholland at the Florida Keys Electric Cooperative, the utility serving the Middle and Upper Keys, there are two kinds of electrical surges — those that originate inside your home, such as from an air conditioner or

refrigerator turning on, and the external kind, most commonly caused by lightning strikes or the power company switching a circuit back on. While only 20 percent of power surges originate outside of your home, those are the ones that cause the most damage.

Electrical surges cause more problems for sensitive small electronics (TVs, DVD players, stereos) than they do for appliances (stoves, washers) but, as more appliances add electronic touchscreens and other electronic interfaces, they become more vulnerable to surges.

You can't completely stop

surges, but you can help protect your home by purchasing a "meter level surge protector" from FKEC. This is a small device installed in your home's electric meter. The cost is approximately \$65 installed.

A surge protector is designed to filter out power surge "spikes" before they reach your electronic devices. FKEC recommends that all sensitive electronics be plugged in to high-quality, UL-rated surge protectors. Be careful when purchasing them, because many models support only a limited number of "pro-

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Photo courtesy NOAA

A bolt of lightning can send a spike, or short burst of electricity over power lines to your home. Surge protectors can help prevent damage to your sensitive electronic equipment.

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cover story

Hot cars can ruin sensitive electronics

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who spend the most time fixing people's computers — the Geek Squad. We spoke to the local Head Geek — Elizabeth Moon, Geek Squad Manager for South Florida. She confirmed the twin plagues of humidity and salt, and added a third bugaboo — sand.

"While the beach is a great place to relax, it can do a number on sensitive electronics," she said. "Changes in temperature and humidity — going from an air conditioned office to your hot, sticky car — can damage screens and delicate circuits, while tiny sand particles can find their way into the darndest places. In general, it's best to keep your valuable tech gadgets out of the hot car and off the sandy beaches."

Moon was full of suggestions for Keys locals and visitors. She said that some companies, such as H2O Audio and Otterbox, sell waterproof cases

and headphones for iPods and MP3 players that are fully submersible up to 10 feet (Sorry, no scuba diving.). "If you don't plan to swim with your MP3 player, it's still a good idea to protect it from nicks and screen scratches with a protective silicone case, available from several manufacturers," she said.

Moon said that one Geek Squad Rule of Thumb is to keep your iPod or MP3 player out of direct sunlight to avoid screen damage. "Most MP3 players have fragile LCD screens. Prolonged exposure to the sun can activate its pixels and make the screen appear dark. If that happens, stop using your iPod and let it sit someplace cool and dark overnight — this will allow the pixels to reset back to normal."

What if your camera or cell phone takes a (brief) bath or shower? The Geeks say, "Try drying it out with a hair dryer or place it in an airtight container with packets of silica gel to absorb the moisture." (You can

find silica gel at any outdoor store or packed with a new pair of shoes.)

If you insist on taking your laptop along on a camping trip, buy a model designed with a tough exterior that can withstand a bumpy ride. If you drop a normal laptop, its internal components should remain undamaged. However, the screen may be damaged by the fall. If it is, hook your laptop up to a monitor — most laptops have a monitor jack. By doing this, you'll still be able to use the internal hard drive and download your files.

The Geek Squad also recommends all-weather GPS units. Some models even float.

Head Geek Moon says: "In Florida, there are two main killers for electronics. One is power surges. Even using a battery backup or strong surge protector does not guarantee that your equipment will be safe during a major storm. The second killer is humidity."

Check maximum power rating

SURGE / From 7

ected" outlets while the other outlets in the strip may be unprotected. Also make sure that your plugged-in devices don't exceed the surge protector's maximum power rating.

FKEC carries APC brand surge protectors and battery back-up devices, but there are other high-quality brands on the market. Be sure that the product is listed as a transient voltage surge suppressor. This means that it meets the criteria for UL 1449, a minimum performance standard for surge suppressors.

In the Lower Keys and Key West, Keys Energy Services' Power Sentry Program can help provide additional protection from harmful power surges to your home's appliances and electronics. Keys Energy already has lightning and surge protection built into its system, with lightning arrestors on transmission and distribution equipment, and substation relays that kick in whenever low voltage situations occur.

But even with this protection, occasional voltage surges will

On the Web

The following sources offer additional information:

- ◆ Keys Energy (Lower Keys and Key West): www.keysenergy.com or 295-1000.
- ◆ Florida Keys Electric Cooperative (Middle and Upper Keys): www.fkec.com, 852-2431 in Tavernier, 743-5344 in Marathon or toll free 800-858-8845.
- ◆ APC makes surge protectors and battery backup devices: (www.apc.com/tools/surge_selector/).
- ◆ How these devices work: www.howstuffworks.com/surge-protector.htm
- ◆ More information on device selection: www.howstuffworks.com/surge-protector6.htm

reach your home. Because typical home circuit breakers do not react fast enough to stop these surges, your unprotected electronics may be at risk. Keys Energy's Power Sentry Program protects appliances and electronics from costly damage.

Throughout the Keys, licensed electricians also sell and install a variety of surge protectors, inside and outside the home.

A battery backup device (which may include a built-in surge protector) is designed to keep your electronics running for a period of time after the power goes off. Battery backups protect the equipment and provide a

short amount of "emergency" power in case of an outage. But again, make sure that your battery backup (also known as an uninterruptible power source) is rated sufficiently high enough to handle your computer, TV or other critical devices. In the case of a computer, you would be wise to quickly save your current work as soon as the backup battery comes online (usually signaled by a series of beeps).

Ordinary power strips, on the other hand, are not surge protectors. They are nothing more than multiple-outlet extension cords, and may not offer any protection to your equipment.