

On July 22, Auger Falls Park, which had just been opened to the public in April, caught fire. Firefighters say it was an extreme situation. But the team work and rapid response of the Twin Falls, Salmon Tract and BLM firefighters helped to minimize damage.



From ruination to rehabilitation: Response to the Auger Falls fire shows true spirit of Magic Valley



Twin Falls Fire Chief Ron Clark didn't even have to see the July 22nd Auger Falls Park fire to know that every firefighter in the area would be needed – and quickly – to get control of it.

“As soon as the call came through Dispatch, I said to the battalion chief on duty, ‘We’d better launch the bird,’” Clark said. That’s fire lingo for the helicopter that the U.S. Bureau of Land Management has on standby at Magic Valley Regional Airport.

BLM firefighters were not surprised to get the call.

“We were outside and saw all the smoke billowing from town,” said Erich Gleckler, a BLM helitack supervisor. “We were thinking it was a big burn, and then we got the call that the city was asking for everything we had.”

That meant engines as well as air support. The fire was already so explosively hot and fast moving that it had jumped 50-foot cliffs on the canyon wall and was threatening homes on the rim. Before it was all over, 10 homes would be damaged and over 500 acres of canyon land charred.

BLM mobilized two single engine airplanes, referred to as “air tankers” by firefighters, and one helicopter loaded with firefighter tools and a 240-gallon water bucket to the scene in the Snake River Canyon. The agency also dispatched 10 engines and around 60 personnel into the canyon.

Officials from both agencies quickly decided the Twin Falls fire crews would remain on top while BLM would focus mainly on the fire inside the canyon.

“Our bread and butter tends to be structure fires,” said Twin Falls Fire Battalion Chief Jack Barnes. “The BLM specializes in wild land fires. The fuel load on this particular fire was so heavy with all that dried cheat grass and sage brush and with the strong winds out of the west that day, we knew we wouldn’t be able to slow it down by ourselves.”

Gleckler assessed the situation from the air and instructed

(over)

Volunteer Craig Crandall helped on Sept. 11 to begin restoring charred land in Auger Falls Park to native habitat. As a youth, he hunted and fished in the area. As a city park now, hunting is no longer allowed, but someday because of the donations of many Magic Valley folks, it will once again be a natural space with grasses, wildflowers and sagebrush.

Address:
321 2nd Ave. E
P.O. Box 1907
Twin Falls, ID 83303-1907

Emergency phone: 911
Non-emergency phone: 311
City Hall: 735-7287
www.tfid.org



the pilot to land the helicopter on the biggest, greenest lawn he could find on the rim near the fire. The homeowners there were more than happy their yard was a landing pad for helitack firefighters. Gleckler would work as a lookout from his post on top, while below BLM Incident Commander Steve Loucks took charge of stopping the fire in the canyon.

Over a two-and-a-half -hour period, the two planes and the helicopter dropped 9,000 gallons of water on the wildfire. That amounts to four loads each of water from the airplanes and 40 bucket drops from the helicopter.

“It was lucky, actually, to have the river right there so that the helicopter pilot could just dip the bucket, fill it up and drop the load right away,” Clark said.

In most wildfire situations, the BLM adds fire retardant to the air tanker loads, but not in this case.

“We didn’t want to stain structures in the area, and we couldn’t pollute the river,” Gleckler said.

Meanwhile, on a two-mile-stretch of canyon rim above, the Twin Falls and the Salmon Tract fire districts had implemented all their force with two 3,000-gallon tankers, four engines, four brush trucks and 24 firefighters. They were working furiously to put out structure fires and keep buildings and fences safe.

In order to bring the fire in the canyon under control, the BLM took advantage of a waterfall known as Lateral 38 on the south rim.

“It was a natural place to pinch off the fire,” Gleckler said. BLM firefighters dug a fire break there and then started a back fire. The strategy worked. The back fire stopped the larger fire’s progression by burning the fuels in front of it.

The fire had started at about 2:30 p.m.; by midnight all firefighters were able to leave the site.

Now what?

The city and the BLM investigated the fire and concluded the cause to be a burning cigarette thrown carelessly into dried weeds in the Snake River Canyon. The city of Twin Falls has turned the matter over to Idaho Counties Risk Management Program (ICRMP) to pursue expenses.

But it takes time to determine total costs and collect the money. With winter closing in, it was important to begin rehabilitation of the area before it became even more overgrown during the spring of 2011 with the invasive species that had fed the fire.

This is where the story has a happy ending. Magic Valley stepped up in a huge way. Before long government agencies, community members, conservation folks and church groups came together to help restore most of the natural habitat of a century ago that existed in the canyon on Sept. 11.

In all, the city received the following:

- **\$18,000 for reseeding purposes from the Southern Idaho Land Trust.**
- **2,500 pounds of native seed, donated by Kimberly-based Conservation Seeding and Restoration, with a value of approximately \$21,000.**
- **\$2,200 to help with reseeding from the Twin Falls Community Foundation.**
- **Assistance with native grass, sagebrush and wildflower seed selection, mixing, bagging and delivery of seed along with planting instruction and oversight from the BLM.**
- **\$21,000 grant for seeds from the Mid-Snake Resource Conservation and Development program.**
- **400 volunteers from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.**

“It was such an overwhelming demonstration of generosity,” said Twin Falls Parks and Recreation Director Dennis Bowyer. “Clearly in this recession it would have been almost impossible for the city to finance a restoration so soon. These donations of time, money and seed are an example of why the Magic Valley is such a wonderful place to live.”

Bowyer said he expects to use the donations of money and seed over the next few years.

“Don’t expect miracles by next year,” he said.

BLM officials added that re-establishment of sagebrush can take three or four decades but that they are hoping the native grass seed that was planted will out-compete the cheat grass that fueled such an extreme wildfire.