

Volunteer hosts keep campground safe during fire

By David Abrams, Public Affairs Specialist, Western Montana District



How close did campground host Barb Frye get to the Holter Lake fire?

Though she wasn't near enough to get burned, she did have an unexpected shower from one of the fire support helicopters dipping water from the lake.

"It was just coming off Holter Lake and I got drenched by the spillover from the bucket," the long-time host said. "It looked like a fine mist, but let me tell you, when it hit me, it was more than a little spray!"

Barb and her husband Dan have volunteered at the BLM's Holter Lake recreation sites for five years, and they weren't about to let a little water spook them away. It was the end of the summer season and they were determined to make sure that visitors were safely evacuated and that the facilities were well-cared-for.

The Holter Lake Complex Fire, which eventually burned nearly 750 acres, began on August 30 around 2 p.m. It was a Sunday and the campground was gearing up for Labor Day weekend.

Dan was outside the camper trailer where he and Barb live during their summer duty when a bolt of lightning forked through the sky.

"I saw it hit," he said. "Several boaters came off the lake to report the smoke to me."

The fire began in steep, rugged terrain lined with timber and grass and spread quickly. Because the heavily traveled Beartooth Road is the only road along the shores of Holter Lake, there's usually an early call for evacuation. In this case, the order came soon after fire officials saw how quickly the fire was growing.

At the time, Rocky Infanger, Craig-Wolf Creek fire chief, said, "We're trying to get some hand crews in here to support the retardant and bucket operations...We've had strong winds all night on it and we have them today."



Maintenance worker David Keitel, park ranger Rocky Infanger, and campground hosts Dan and Barb Frye were crucial in keeping the Holter Lake Recreation Site safe during the late-summer fire which burned in the neighboring hills north of Helena. Photo by David Abrams

Infanger is also a BLM park ranger, but when fires of this size break out, he steps into his other role and must depend on the campground hosts to pitch in above and beyond their regular call of duties.

"It was pretty much up to Dan and Barb to evacuate the campground since I was tied up with my other duties," he said.

"There were about 20 folks here at the time," Barb said. "Plus, we had people still out fishing on the lake."

All told, it took about two hours to clear the campground and get everyone safely onto the exit route, Dan said.

"Everyone was very cooperative," Barb added. "Of course, when you see smoke coming from right over the hill behind the campground, then they tend to clear out pretty quickly."



The Holter Lake Complex Fire, which eventually burned nearly 750 acres, began on August 30 around 2 p.m. Photo courtesy of Rocky Infanger

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The campground visitors were gone, but Barb and Dan remained to shut down the facilities and make sure the bathrooms were kept clean for the firefighters who were staging their operations in the area. The campground hosts' presence came in handy when the large "Super Scooper" aircraft arrived at Holter.

"The planes showed up a day early," Infanger said, "so we had to react quickly. Dan went right out on the water to help warn other boaters about the approaching Super Scoopers, and he stayed out there two days, along with other BLM staff and some homeowners, along with the Lewis and Clark County Sheriff's Office."

The large aircraft come in low over the lake and only need about 400 yards to get a bellyful of water before going back airborne, but that short approach and quick touchdown can be hazardous for anyone on the lake.

"(Dan) and Barb—and all of our personnel at Holter Lake—did such a great job during this whole time, keeping the public and the campground safe," Infanger said.



A Bombardier 415 Superscooper plane skims the surface of Holter Lake for about 400 yards before lifting back into the air with a bellyful of water it will then dump on the flames of the Holter Complex Fire. Photo courtesy of Rocky Infanger



A Bombardier 415 Superscooper plane drops its watery payload on the Holter Complex Fire in late August. Photo courtesy of Rocky Infanger



A helicopter scoops water from Holter Lake into a large bucket before flying off to an active portion of the Holter Complex Fire in late August. Photo courtesy of Rocky Infanger



Fire support aircraft drop fire retardant on the Holter Complex Fire in late August. Photo courtesy of Rocky Infanger