

COMMUNICATING WILDFIRE SAFETY

by Cris Haynes

There are many facets to fighting wild fires successfully, various unsung heroes who, without their expertise and help would make the job more dangerous and in some instances impossible to combat. Radio communication is crucial to any fire, needs are unique to each fire, and are set up by specialists who maintain them over the life of the fire.

Leroy Sisley and Tom Herman, two communications experts who are working on the Kettle Complex fire hail from the west side of Washington State. Leroy, a lieutenant firefighter-truck officer from the Northgate area

has worked the downtown Seattle area for 20 years. He's on the hazmat team, and has been Seattle Fire Department Communications team leader for Seafair and other major area events. He builds and maintains independent radio systems for each fire he's involved with, reprogramming and cloning radios to fit the needs of each fire. He manages dispatch centers for fire camps which operate the same way as large city dispatch centers, and has extensive experience with disaster area protocols, having been in New Orleans, LA to help in the wake of hurricane Katrina in 2005; he was also involved with recovery after the mudslide

disaster at Oso, Washington.

Tom Herman, who is on the Kettle Complex fire with the Department of Natural Resources as Incident Communications Technician (COMT) works on the outskirts of Chehalis, WA. His duties have him on lookout for the Communications Unit Leader (COML), and helping design and deploying radio systems for peak performance. As COMT, both Tom and Leroy are the ones who go into the field, constructing, updating and maintaining radio systems. Some deployments can be easy access drive up sites with one or two radios, others are more complex, linking 5

or more repeaters, combining drive ups and helicopter fly-ins. Checking guy ropes, changing batteries, repairing animal damage to coaxial cables and other basic maintenance is one of their many duties, as well as repairing hand held radios and other communications items that may come to them broken or damaged.

A typical day for Leroy and Tom starts with them getting up and ready for their day, which begins at 5 a.m., when they are available to reclone (reprogram) and hand out radios, deal with any crisis that may arise, and handing out batteries for radios. It may surprise the reader to know that fires run on

“AA” batteries! Not until the morning rush is complete will they have breakfast, run morning communications checks, and head out to the field to service sites that may be in need. This takes up the majority of their daily duties, after which they return to base camp, usually late in the afternoon, they eat and then prepare for the evening rush of returning fire crews.

They may be the last team to work on some fires, if so, they must retrieve all of the radio equipment borrowed from the Federal National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) cache in Boise, Idaho, which means they must return to all mountaintop radio sites, pull those systems, and round up all hand held radios and accessories. Radios issued from other


agencies are turned in to issuing agencies for rehab and possible redeployment to other fire locations in need.

“Our day revolves around the REAL heroes: The people that have to go out on the fire lines and work long hours under dangerous and difficult conditions” says Tom, “It's a privilege and honor to serve them, and to give them the best support service that we possibly can.” It's a privilege and honor to have such professional and dedicated communications experts as part of that team, helping protect our public and private lands from wildfires; you are all heroes in our book!



Leroy Sisley and Tom Herman

Fire Thank You from Facebook Reader Barb Anderson: DNR and DOC deserve a shout out for their response and tireless work in toughest fire season ever!



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