

'Don't Burn the Rally'

Fire-Prevention Campaign Hits the Mark

FOR A WEEK EACH AUGUST, the Black Hills of South Dakota become the heart and soul of what some term the “largest free-wheeling motorcycle rally in the world.”

In short, it's known as “Sturgis,” named for the small town where motorcycle enthusiasts have gathered for more than 60 years to ride and race amid some of the most beautiful scenery in the country.

But for the 2002 Sturgis Motorcycle Rally, a dangerous threat was lurking at every turn. That threat was wildfire. And it had local, state and federal fire and forestry officials worried.

The rally draws hundreds of thousands of motorcyclists, who traverse the rolling, forested “Hills” and beyond. There are thousands more non-rally visitors. And in the midst of it all stands the 1.2-million-acre Black Hills National Forest.

In the summer of 2002, South Dakota was in its third consecutive year of drought. Already, there had been several wildfires, one of which devastated nearly 11,000 wooded acres and came within a whisker of burning the town of Deadwood, another favorite spot of rallygoers.

Combined, the expected half-million visitors and tinder-dry conditions meant one thing: a disaster was waiting to happen.

“With the fire conditions that were present, one ignition could have brought another catastrophic fire,” said Joe Lowe, coordinator for the South Dakota Wildland Fire Suppression Division, a state agency charged with wildland fire suppression, training, education, and prevention. “And with a large number of people in the Hills, it would have presented us with major evacuation problems.”



Main Street,
Sturgis, South Dakota



Damage from the Grizzly Gulch Fire reminded riders to be careful

Taking the offensive

So the South Dakota Interagency Fire Council, a consortium of fire, forestry and land management agencies, took the offensive. In July, the state's governor imposed fire restrictions. That meant a ban on all open flame; restricting smoking to inside vehicles, buildings or designated areas; and requiring spark-arrestors on all motorized vehicles traveling off-road.



Still, there was the issue of how to deal with so many out-of-state visitors unfamiliar with the extreme fire danger. It was clear, officials said, that a massive public education effort was needed as well.

Black Hills National Forest officials turned to the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho, for help. With local resources already stretched thin, officials wanted a national wildfire prevention and education team to come to South Dakota and develop, implement and manage a fire-prevention campaign for the Black Hills and the rally.

It was a daunting task with a short timeline. Four specialists in the areas of fire prevention, education and communications from Alaska, California and Utah were quickly handpicked to form the team. Two specialists from the South Dakota Wildland Fire Suppression Division were added as local liaisons.

With the rally just one week away, the team first met with area fire and forestry officials to establish objectives that would meet the overall goal of reducing the incidence of human-caused fires.

In the Black Hills National Forest alone, people cause half of all fires and the problem is growing, according to Dean Berger, the forest's fire management officer. Adding a large influx of people would increase the already high risk exponentially, Berger reasoned.

Embarking on a campaign

So a multi-faceted campaign was developed, centering on the theme, "Don't Burn the Rally." Key elements involved an extensive public outreach program and 10 roving fire patrols that could keep a watchful eye on conditions and quickly suppress any fires that did start.

Now the question became: how to really get people's attention so that the fire prevention message would sink in. The team needed something that was both eye-catching and lasting.

So team leader Bud Rotroff went looking for something that would be symbolic of the

rally. That's when he found Al Rieman, president of Black Hills Harley-Davidson.

Just two weeks earlier, Harley-Davidson had unveiled its new 2003 model-year motorcycles, specially designed to commemorate the manufacturer's 100th anniversary. Everyone had been waiting to see them. And Rieman had just gotten one.

Sharing the concern about a potential wild-fire, Rieman readily agreed to let the team photograph the motorcycle for a poster that would sport the rally theme. To round out the image, team members recruited a Sturgis firefighter and Smokey Bear, and set them all against a scenic Black Hills backdrop.

With that, the face of the rally's fire-prevention campaign was born. And within 72 hours, 1,500 of the special posters were hitting the streets, along with thousands of other signs, brochures, stickers, placemats, Smokey Bear pins, bandanas and other fire-prevention pieces.

Patrolling for fires

By then, the fire patrols were also at full throttle. Considered one of the most critical elements of the campaign, the patrols were used to talk to the public about the fire danger, to hand out prevention materials, and to detect and extinguish fires.

Each patrol, working a 12-hour daily shift, consisted of a fire truck and two or three volunteer firefighters rotating from among 36 Black Hills fire departments. Those units traveled to towns, campgrounds, picnic areas, and wooded areas—where many bikers are known to camp—to check on conditions and to talk about the fire danger and prevention.

In addition, three volunteer fire departments in strategic areas staffed their stations 'round-the-clock for 10 days, augmenting the Black Hills National Forest's 26 full-time fire-fighting units and other local fire department efforts.

Again, the goal was to provide a faster response to fires and other emergencies. It was a formula that proved effective when firefighters were able to quickly extinguish a few small



Left to right: Sturgis Fire Chief Ron Koan discusses fire patrol effort with Joe Lowe and Dean Berger

fires during the rally that started from lightning strikes.

"The public's reaction to the patrols was really positive," said LaVerne Hermanson, patrol coordinator and one of the team's local liaisons. "They were out there and visible every day, which made people think. The firefighters felt a great sense of accomplishment, too."

Public outreach

The story was the same in downtown Sturgis, which forms the hub of the rally, according to Beth Adam, team liaison and public information officer for the State Wildland Fire Suppression Division.

There, rallygoers were very receptive to information about fire safety and prevention, said Adam, who set up and helped staff a booth as part of the campaign's public outreach.

Smokey and the 2002 Sturgis Motorcycle Rally National Fire Prevention Team





Bill Bell hands out Smokey bandanas and fire prevention materials to bikers entering Custer State Park

“Education is definitely the key,” she said. “The awareness has been tremendous this year. People were very respectful of the fire ban. I heard very few complaints about not having a campfire. They were seeing the damage that the Grizzly Gulch and Little Elk wildfires in this area had already done and they understood why we were concerned.”

By the end of the 10-day campaign, there were few places the message hadn’t reached. Signs, posters and brochures could be seen in campgrounds, businesses, state and federal parks, and other public gathering places throughout the Black Hills.

Local media ran stories and public service announcements promoting fire prevention. Shopping mall marquees flashed the rally theme. A Web site carried up-to-date information on both the fire restrictions and prevention measures.

In all, more than 34,000 fire-prevention pieces were handed out and more than 10,000 personal contacts were made, team officials report.

Hitting the mark

It is exactly that effort—and the cooperation of rallygoers—that fire officials point to as the reason the 2002 rally closed with one remarkable statistic: no major human-caused fires, despite an estimated attendance of nearly 500,000.

“It’s a success story,” Lowe said. “I expected there to be fire starts and we didn’t have any. Without this campaign and everyone’s efforts,

I think we would have had a lot more human-caused fires because people would not have been responsible for their actions and adhered to the burn ban that had been put in place.”

John Twiss, forest supervisor for the Black Hills National Forest, was impressed by the campaign as well.

“The results were excellent,” said Twiss. “When it’s that dry and you have that many people in the forest, we had the potential to have forest fires and we didn’t. I really attribute a lot of that to the prevention effort that went on there and the innovative approach they took.”

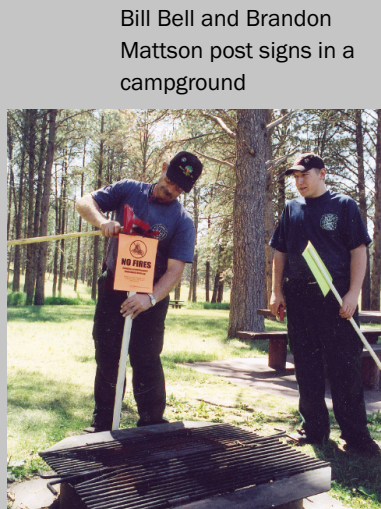
Berger agreed, noting that the \$100,000 price tag for the team, the patrols and the prevention materials was well worth the cost. The project was funded by the U.S. Forest Service through a special appropriation available when extreme fire conditions and threats exist.

“Human-caused fires generally are the most expensive on fire-suppression costs and damage,” Berger said. “They often cost \$1 million or more,” he added, citing the \$10 million to \$12 million cost of the 2000 Jasper Fire that burned 86,000 acres in the southern Black Hills, as an example.

For the 2002 Grizzly Gulch Fire in Deadwood, which preceded the rally by just a month, suppression costs alone were estimated to be more than \$7 million. Businesses there reportedly lost in revenue another \$2.8 million in the nearly three days the town was evacuated. That revenue loss now approaches a reported \$10 million.

Dollars and cents notwithstanding, the real savings is in protecting human life and property, officials agree.

“What this team did is amazing,” said Berger. “In a short period of time, we educated a tremendous number of people, including those who live in the Black Hills year-round. If this effort even prevented one major fire, not only in the Black Hills but elsewhere in the country because of what people learned, it was well worth it.” ■



Bill Bell and Brandon Mattson post signs in a campground