

On Patrol

Keeping the Forest Safe from Fire

More about the
Sturgis Rally:
A day with the patrol

08:45 A.M. — **MAURY LARUE STARTS HIS FINAL CHECK** of a shiny, red quick-attack fire truck and its contents. Shovels. Hand tools. Boots. Helmet. Nomex jacket. Gloves. Smokey Bear stuff. It's all there. He starts the truck's pump to make sure it will flow water if needed. That's OK too. Now he is set. Another day of fire patrol is about to begin.

LaRue, 55, is a firefighter with the Sturgis Volunteer Fire Department in South Dakota. He has been patrolling for days. So far, it has gone fairly well. But it is another hot, dry day. And another opportunity for the thing people in the forested Black Hills dread most: a wildfire.

The risk for fires is high in the summer of 2002. South Dakota is tinder dry from three years of drought. And for the last several days, nearly 500,000 motorcyclists have been thundering in and around the Black Hills, including Sturgis, as part of the 2002 Sturgis Motorcycle Rally.

A wildfire isn't just a distant possibility. It's a real probability.

In July, only weeks before the rally, wildfires burned thousands of acres in the "Hills" on either side of Sturgis, population 6,400. The largest fire, named Grizzly Gulch, started just outside nearby Deadwood, forcing evacuation of the town's 1,530 residents and thousands of tourists for three days. Seven homes and 15 outbuildings were lost; the rest of town narrowly escaped the same fate.

LaRue was there for both fires. Since then, he has seen countless times the charred, blackened Hills left behind—a reminder of the beauty that once was, and now is lost. He knows it is up to each of them on fire patrol to help avert another tragedy.

9:15 a.m. — **LaRue skillfully maneuvers the fire truck on a scenic, winding road that passes Rainbow Cliff en route from Sturgis to Deadwood.** Scores of motorcyclists crowd the road in both directions. Despite the heavy traffic, he manages to scan the Hills, looking for wisps of smoke or other telltale signs of fire.

As he approaches a wooded area near the roadside, he slows and turns onto a "road" of

beaten-down grass. A few hundred yards to the left is a makeshift campsite. Beyond that, another. It is a common sight during the weeklong rally when, for many bikers, the Hills literally become home. And that means LaRue has work to do.

The patrols are more than just a ride in the country. They are part of a calculated plan to keep rallygoers, tourists and the forest itself safe from fire. The mission is to spread the word that the fire danger is high and safety is paramount, as well as to quickly detect and extinguish fires.

At the helm of the patrols is a national wildfire prevention and education team, brought to the Black Hills at the request of area fire and forestry officials to plan and execute a public fire education campaign during the rally.

The effort is a necessity, officials say, given the mix of dangerous fire conditions and the large influx of people, mostly from out of state, spread throughout more than a million acres of the Black Hills.

Maury LaRue,
Sturgis Volunteer Fire
Department





Jerry Frank, from Independence, Missouri

A similar patrol effort was piloted during the 2000 rally, targeting just the northern Black Hills. It was successful, fire officials say, but limited in scope, resources and area. Lessons learned from that effort provided the basis for the more extensive operation in 2002.

9:30 a.m. — LaRue stops his fire truck short of the first camp. The “No Campfires” sign posted days earlier on a nearby tree is still there. He grabs a clipboard and some fire prevention materials and casually walks up to a group of bikers. His manner is pleasant and calm.

After an exchange of greetings, he asks if they are aware of the high fire danger and the current fire restrictions. The group says they are. They’ve seen the signs—and the burned Hills. LaRue asks if they have any questions. They don’t. He thanks them for doing their part for fire safety. It is on to the next campsite.

To establish the patrol network, prevention team members geographically divided the Black Hills, which encompass most of western South Dakota, into three fire-watch areas from north to south. They invited the 38 volunteer fire departments throughout the area to participate. Of those, 36 were able to lend equipment and personnel to the effort.

Next, the team assembled fire prevention materials — conveniently gathered in a Smokey Bear goodie bag, complete with trademark paw print — and held a kickoff meeting. There, firefighters were briefed on patrol objectives, the fire restrictions, key campaign messages and personal safety.

Ten patrol units were established to cover a daily shift from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. for a 10-day watch period that began in advance of the rally. Those patrols augmented similar efforts

by local fire departments and the Black Hills National Forest’s 26 full-time firefighting units.

In addition, one fire department was designated in each of the three watch areas to be on duty around-the-clock to provide a quicker response to fires that did break out.

9:35 a.m. — At the next campsite, LaRue meets Jerry, “Easy” Ed and their buddies. All are from out of state. They are experienced rallygoers. They know and love the Hills. They understand the danger. And they’re more than OK with the rules.

“Coming here every year, you just know that August up here is dry and hot,” says Jerry Frank, 42, of Independence, Missouri. “You usually expect to not have a campfire. This year was drier. We’ve seen the fire damage and the signs.”

“Easy” Ed Claud, 33, is an eight-year rally veteran from Nunda, New York. He has seen fire restrictions before, adding that warning signs are “definitely a good idea,” because rallygoers from other states may not be aware of the fire conditions.

“We always ride by and check out what Smokey says,” Claud said, referring to large likenesses of Smokey Bear used by the U.S. Forest Service to show the fire-danger level. “I’ve seen it where it was so dry, you had to form a circle and smoke in a circle. I always come prepared.”

Those words are music to LaRue’s ears. The two men definitely “get it,” he says. Their attitude is typical of what he encounters as he talks to hundreds of rallygoers, many of whom readily invite him into their campsites to hear his message.

“When I go on my fire-severity patrol, the minute we pull up at a campground and grab signs, they say ‘hey man, we know. No fires,’” LaRue said. “Not one person has given us trouble. I think people misunderstand the wild, independent nature of the motorcyclists. They are just as concerned as the next citizen about the environment they live in.”

1:00 p.m. — Ray Bubb, assistant chief of the Lead Fire Department, takes over the patrol. With

the day heating up and the prime time for new fires approaching, he wants to head deep into the Hills. Bubb is targeting the remotest of areas—checking conditions, watching for fire starts and looking for a stray biker who may be camping off the beaten path, unaware of the danger and the safety precautions.

An experienced wildland firefighter, Bubb knows the Hills between Deadwood and Lead like the back of his hand. He was in the thick of it during Grizzly Gulch. He still can't believe what that fire did to his forest.

"We call this 'the asbestos forest,'" says Bubb as he looks at a stand of charred trees. "A three- to five-acre fire in the big timber is pretty normal for the northern Hills. This year, we lost some of our asbestos somewhere. To have a ten-thousand-acre fire is phenomenal."

In the southern Black Hills the story is not much different. Dry. Dangerous. Full of people. And fresh with memories of recent fires, like the 86,000-acre Jasper fire in 2000—the largest and costliest in state history.

3:30 p.m. — Assistant Chief Bill Bell, 48, and firefighter Brandon Mattson, 18, both of the Custer Volunteer Fire Department, have the day's duty in the southern Black Hills. As they cruise the Harry Mills Campground, one of many recreation spots in the Black Hills National Forest, they notice there are no fire warnings posted in the area.

So Bell pulls out his trusty tools: a wooden stake, a "No Campfires" sign, a staple gun and a hammer. He and Mattson survey the area and pick a spot for the sign between the campfire ring and the barbecue grill. This summer, the grates on all grills have been wired shut to help reinforce special fire restrictions that prohibit open flame of any kind.

Within minutes, a vanload of people pulls up. Bell greets them and begins a conversation. They are a family of six, on their way to Colorado from Illinois for their first family vacation in 16 years. They wonder if they can stop and have a picnic.

Bell assures them it's OK as long as they don't start a campfire. As they continue to visit, he weaves information on the fire danger and the current restrictions into the conversation. The family



says they have seen national news coverage of the summer's devastating wildfires. They are only too happy to do their part to prevent another fire.

Off to the side, Bell spies a shy, little girl watching him intently. He stops and retrieves his Smokey Bear goodie bag from the fire truck. As Bell hands the 7-year-old girl several Smokey Bear items — pencils, rulers, stickers — he explains the importance of being fire-safe, especially in the forest. She is clearly thrilled with the treasures. And he has touched one more person with the idea of fire prevention.

Grizzly Gulch Fire damage around White Rock, part of the "asbestos forest" near Deadwood

Sturgis Assistant Fire Chief Bill Bell hands out Smokey Bear materials





“Easy” Ed Claud, from Nunda, New York

It is the public contacts that fire officials and team members are interested in knowing about. What is learned in the field, they say, can be used to make the patrol effort better in the future.

By the end of the rally, the 10 fire patrols had made more than 6,000 public contacts, handed out thousands of pieces of fire prevention materials and had driven more than 20,000 miles. As a whole, patrol members consider the effort and the public education campaign a success.

“It didn’t matter who you talked to, what time of the day it was, or where they were,” LaRue says. “The people we met loved knowing that we were concerned about fires and about them. They told us ‘We love coming to the Black Hills and we don’t want it destroyed.’”

Bubb is a believer too.

“This is the first time in 14 years of rallies that I have not been called out during duty hours to extinguish a campfire,” he says.

9:30 p.m. — *As night falls, Bubb heads back to the Sturgis fire station to complete his tour of duty. There is another truck equipment check to conduct. A field report to write. And a transition briefing to give to the firefighters who are on duty through the night.*

Today, he concludes, was a good day. There were no fires. Maybe it was luck. But maybe it’s because, somewhere along the way, people have been paying attention. ■



(Left to right) Maury LaRue, Ryan Grover, his sister-in-law Kristin Grover and his brother Kenley Grover, all from Provo, Utah