

Meanwhile,

Back at the Ranch

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Once again we have had a dry year at our home on Camp Creek. Rainfall has been about two-thirds of our “normal.” The creek stopped running around the beginning of August, with only small pools and seepage remaining in a few shady places. When the leaves on the trees turn gold, the water will start to come back, slowly relieving the drought and fire danger.

Lightning Strikes

Several months ago, we had a terrific thunder and lightning storm. The lightning was right over us. There was no time between the lightning and the explosion of thunder. In the middle of the storm, the rain began to fall. It was a “toad strangler,” to use the local vernacular. We received about a half-inch of rain in less than an hour.

We could still hear the thunder in the distance when the spotter plane started flying a grid over our canyon to look for fires. Scanning the hills around us, we saw nothing. The plane moved on after about twenty minutes of circling. It was still in sight on the horizon when our neighbor called. He said a fire crew had just crossed his bridge and hiked up the hill behind his house.

After a bit, we could hear their chain saws up on the ridgeline. Through our binoculars, we could see them using hand pumps on a burning dead snag. When they had put the flames down, they felled the snag. The rest of the strike area was on the other side of the ridge from us. Thank goodness for the rain.

Lightning Strikes Twice

A few weeks later on the last weekend of July, we had gone to the SolWest Renewable Energy Fair in John Day, Oregon. On Sunday, we received a call from our neighbor, Karen Perez. A lightning storm had come through the night before, and a wildfire was moving towards our little canyon.

I checked my cell phone messages. Our friend Dave, who lives a few miles away, had left a message. Basically it said, “Fire in your area! Call-Call-Call!” I did call. Dave had tried to go see what was happening up at our place, but had been shooed back by a county sheriff.

As he drove back home, the highway patrol was setting up a roadblock. He found out that all the campgrounds around nearby Iron Gate Reservoir had been evacuated. When he left the roadblock, our next-door neighbor was

trying to talk his way past to come rescue his dogs, which were still on the creek.

On the Road

We were nine hours away. That is an awful feeling. I tried to call our house sitter, Shay. Apparently the phone lines had already burned up. We threw everything—camping gear and our entire booth display—helter-skelter into our car in a mad rush and took off. (Many thanks to Don DeLong for all his help while I was panicking.) Once we were on the road, I called Karen and had her call Shay on the two-meter ham radio.

Since a number of the people in our large rural area are amateur radio operators (hams), we have a two-meter ham radio set to a neighborhood frequency. This radio is always on. (For any hams passing by, it is 146.400 simplex.) Although Shay is not a ham, when lives or property are in danger, anyone may use ham frequencies.

It turned out that our neighbor had made it into the canyon with a sheriff escort to get his dogs. He was at our house when Karen called on the radio. We made plans for our house sitter to leave and take our dog to our friend Dave’s house and drop her there.

Decisions, Decisions

Our cell phone signal kept dropping away as we sped along the highway toward home. I requested our neighbor’s cell number from Karen, and called and left a message for him. He called and had to leave a message for me since we were in dark territory by then. We finally connected. He was on his way back to the creek and asked what we wanted saved from our house. I will tell you now—that is a knock-you-on-your-butt question. We had to think fast.

We told him where our important papers were. All in one place, ready to go. (I did learn something from the Salmon River fires in 1987.) The main computer in the office was next. Then what? What was absolutely irreplaceable? I told him, “All of the watercolors by my friend, Sarah. They’re in almost every room.” I didn’t want to make too big a list since he was also going to save his own irreplaceable possessions. What a wonderful neighbor to think of us.

I couldn’t help wondering, what if everything burns up? Well, we had been camping at the fairgrounds in John Day. In the car with us, we had our tent, sleeping bags, favorite pillows, four days’ worth of clothes, some solar lanterns,

wallet, purse, camera, and all the accoutrements to make coffee in the morning. My dog-daughter, Emma, was safe with "Uncle Dave." I started to cheer up.

Home at Last

We knew we wouldn't get by the roadblock on the main road, so we came in on the back road. We rounded a corner and could see the lake and the fire burning on the other side of a small inlet. A very big helicopter was hovering low, dipping its water bucket into the lake. On our side of the water, a man crouched by his pickup, camera in hand. We saw the official emblem on the door of the truck. When we drove by, he turned towards us and raised his hand as if to stop us. We smiled and waved, treating it as just a friendly gesture, while we drove by without slowing down. We didn't want to be stopped.

When we reached the house, Bob-O put the box scraper on the tractor and positioned it to dig a fire line around the house. We laid out water hoses in strategic places. I took a few things from our car and replaced them with things I thought more important.

We listened to our scanner for the rest of that day and the next day. The firefighters gained control of the fire. Although the fire did not come close to our house, it did come very close to our only exit road. We did not know till two days later that Bob-O's son, Allen, was working with his hotshot crew on the fire. He took a break from mopping up and came to check on us. What a great kid.

So life goes on at our little ranchette. Bob-O is fond of saying, "You know, people see our names in that glossy magazine and they think our lives are so glamorous." Of course he says this when we are knee- or elbow-deep in some hard, dirty job. I have to say, humor gets us through a lot here in our wild paradise.

Access

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