

THE FIRE IN MCLURE, BC

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The McLure fire started in McLure, BC on July 30. Actually, it was the second fire to start there. Another fire started the day before and was quickly brought under control by a combined ground and air assault. The McLure fire initially headed south towards Kamloops, then turned around and went north towards Exlou, Louis Creek and Barriere. On the night of July 31 four homes were lost just North of McLure. On August 1 the fire traveled an incredible 16 kilometres, sweeping everything before it. The heat was so intense that many trees exploded and the ground under them was burned bare of anything organic.

The Barriere Search and Rescue Group set up an Emergency Center in Barriere on July 30 which continued in operation until August 28. On the night of July 31 we lost our electricity when the fire burned through the main power transmission line serving the North Thompson area. Fortunately the EOC had battery backup power for the radios and a generator was brought in for lighting. Late on July 31, Rod Salem, the Central Region PEP director asked Lawrence, VE7DPQ, to open a ham radio link between Barriere and the Provincial Region Emergency Operations

Center (PREOC) in Kamloops, using the VE7RTN repeater located just north of Barriere. Kevin, VE7KE, Dave, VE7EFQ and Merv, VE7EI — all from the Thompson River ARC — were contacted and asked to be ready to assist as needed. Ken, VE7EFL and his team of ham operators handled communications at the PREOC end of the circuit. The Barriere hams also operated the control station on the Barriere SAR net.

August 1 is a day none of us will forget. The sky to the south of us was filled with smoke that was so thick we could not see the fire that was causing it. We started issuing evacuation alert notices early in the morning, but the fire was approaching so fast that we were soon telling people to leave immediately. Early in the afternoon the smoke had become so thick we could hardly see. At this point we were advised that a firestorm would pass through Barriere in an hour and we had to be out before then. Somehow this was done without injury or panic. We had to travel to the Emergency Reception Center in Kamloops by a 308 kilometre route around the fire instead of the 63 km route we would normally use! As it turned out the fire was stopped along the sides of Barriere and not a single house was lost there thanks to the local fire department and a number of other residents who remained behind. The firestorm moved with such

ferocity that it totally ignored fireguards and water bombers. When we left town that day we did not know if we would ever see our homes again.

Fires continued to burn in the Barriere area until September and a number of additional evacuations were done during the first three weeks in August. As we never lost telephone communications with the PREOC in Kamloops very little use was made of the ham radio link. However, the Amateur Radio operators were instrumental in keeping vital SAR communications going throughout the period by manning the SAR base station and providing communications relays to evacuation teams operating out of range of the base station. Pam, VE7TXF and Cliff, VE7EIN, from Clearwater, and Alex, VE7JAF and Leo, VE7EHE, from the PREOC in Kamloops provided badly needed assistance when the local hams were unable to be there. John, VE7NI, opened an HF station in Kamloops and passed updates to the Emergency Coordination Centre in Victoria for a short time at the beginning of the fire. HF communications were not needed beyond this as telephone communications were always available.

The McLure fire burned 26,345 hectares of which over 6000 hectares were burned on August 1 alone. On that day about 3700 people were evacuated, over 80 homes

and six businesses including an \$80 million sawmill were destroyed.

Ironically, an emergency exercise using the scenario of a forest fire was held in Barriere late in May. The situation we found ourselves in during late July and August was nothing like our exercise as the real fire refused to play by the rules. A lot of work is now needed to improve local disaster plans so that they are more realistic. As usual, one area in which there can be improvement is radio communications. Had it not been for our Amateur Radio operators we would have had great difficulty maintaining communications with the evacuation teams.

Between now and next summer we will be rewriting our procedures and doing a lot of training. Had our telephone system failed, the VE7RTN repeater would have been the only communications link with the outside and it would not have been able to handle the huge volume of message traffic that was generated. Future plans must include a greatly increased voice and data radio capability. (For more information on the BC Fires and the role of the Provincial Region Emergency Operations Center see the ARES column on page 55.)



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nearby, for sending one of our Radio Ops to meet the helicopter in Summerland, 48 kilometres south, to provide communications to the EOC for some Forestry Personnel.

Or A/Fire Chief Sid Lebeau using the APRS map displayed on the radio room computer to point to the place where one of our operators was to meet firefighters backing down the mountain to the water, preparing for evacuation.

The smoke was so thick, that the site could not be picked out visually. We then radioed the coordinates for that site to Al, VE7MET, on his houseboat so that he could plot the course on his GPS.

It was September 8 (21 days) before the crisis was declared over in our area and the EOC stood down. The Amateur Radio Community, along with the other hundreds of volunteers, had done a superb job.

So many need to be thanked for their contributions to the emergency. The City of

Kelowna held an Appreciation Day for all participants, and the Amateur Radio Community was there too. Personally, I am grateful to my XYL, Betty Ann, for the great job she did in handling all the calls that came to our home, for all the secretarial work that she did, and for keeping me pointed in the right direction for the next task. (Where would we be without the tremendous support at home!) She is now studying to obtain her ham licence — she wants to be part of some of the front line action if another crisis happens!