

Fire In The Night

LVRAC Field Day Operators Help Prevent A Tragedy

They smelled the smoke at 3:40 Sunday morning.

Operating in the chilly pre-dawn hours at the Las Vegas Radio Amateur Club Field Day 2026, Rick, K7FYI and Dave, N2JNR each became aware of the nearby fire at the same time.

The club's Field Day site was at an elevation of eight thousand feet in the Spring Mountain Range northwest of the city. The land here is parched and brittle. The fire danger is extreme. The ground cover is a highly combustible cocktail of bunchgrasses, sagebrush, milkvetch and sandwort. Sprinkled across the slope are mountain mahogany, ponderosa pine, pinyon pine and Utah juniper trees.

The previous evening, winds hammered the mountain with 50 MPH gusts. Sunday morning, they had died down. A single spark from an illegal fire riding on a sudden gust of wind could instantly set the terrain ablaze.

And this is exactly what came close to taking place.

"I smelled smoke from inside my tent while I was operating to try and stay warm," says Dave. "The temperature started to drop and trying to sleep had it's challenges at this point.

"I was working CW on 20 Meters. The antenna was my 6 band hex beam going into an Icom 7610. It was very chilly out... frigid is more like it... and I recall smelling smoke. As the windows in my tent were closed, I definitely had some concerns and didn't want to feel trapped.

"Noticing some local FT8 activity, I knew Rick was up as well."

Rick was operating 20 Meter FT8 with 10 watts into a mag loop from his RV when he noticed the smell was changing from melting plastic to burning wood.

"Just as I was about to open my door to investigate, I heard noises outside," says Rick.

"It was Dave, N2JNR. He'd seen my lights on and was about to knock. I think we both asked, 'Smell that?' at the same time. Dave spotted a flickering orange glow in the trees just south of our camp, just past the K1BAA tent. We decided we needed to venture over.

“As we walked south on Champion Road, we were barely past Bret's KB1AA tent site when we saw the fire, a campfire. It was right behind an older gray sedan that had backed into the tight space, just off the road between a few trees. I'd seen that car roll in around sunset the night before with 3 or 4 people in it. A young man was standing by the fire, likely surprised by our presence.

“We saw a kid,” says Dave, “Maybe between 14-16 years old. Maybe he was trying to stay warm by the fire. Rick told him it's illegal to have fires, that signs are posted about no fires. The kid didn't really seem to have much reaction. He didn't say anything. Rick asked if he was OK and still not much reaction. Rick told him he needed to put the fire out. We were both vocal about how dry it is up there and with the gusts that come unexpectedly, that this could create a big fire.”

But the young man didn't do anything. The fire kept going. Tall flames leapt into the pre-dawn sky. Temperatures were in the forties. Rick agreed with Dave, that the young man was trying to stay warm.

“He didn't have a jacket on, but he also didn't need one with that fire roaring. This wasn't a small, cozy gather round and warm your hands kind of fire. This was a full on, don't get too close or you'll singe your eyebrows kind of fire with flames 3 to 4 feet high.”

Rick kept pressing the young man to put out the fire. He said, “You know you can't have fires up here. It's really easy to burn the mountain down.” There was no reaction. “Are you going to put that out?” he asked again, and there was still no response. Rick pushed a third time, meeting the same lack of any response.

“I considered for a moment that he may not understand what I was saying, maybe a language barrier, but I think we made the point. I didn't see the other occupants of the car that I remembered from earlier. Not intending to provoke a confrontation, Dave and I returned to the LVRAC site.

“I thought about the location of the fire, not in an open clearing, but a tight little spot with dry brush and overhanging trees. I poked my head out a few minutes later and could still see the orange glow through the trees. No bigger than before but certainly not any smaller.”

From his RV, Rick used his recently acquired Starlink Mini to call 311.

“It wasn't an emergency, not yet. I navigated the many prompts to talk to the Clark County Fire Department. My call was answered right away, a pleasant surprise compared to other times I could never get through on 311. I explained the situation. After a few questions, the dispatcher told me they were sending a fire crew.”

Before long, later, firefighters from Mount Charleston Fire and Rescue rolled in.

“I heard a lone diesel engine getting closer along Lee Canyon Road and then a small fire truck turned onto Champion Road,” says Rick. “No lights, no siren. Good, I thought, they're not going to wake everyone up. A few moments later, I heard another truck coming down the hill, a full size fire engine. It was staged along Lee Canyon Road.”



A week or so after Field Day, we checked in with Mount Charleston Fire and Rescue to find out what happened.

Fire Chief Jason Douglas confirmed the dispatch of two units, one large fire engine and one command pickup truck.

“The engine stayed at the entry way and the command truck patrolled the campsite,” the Chief told us. “They reported that they could not find any open fires on the patrol. This typically happens when the campers see our lights or our vehicles. They extinguish the fires as we arrive.”

And then, shortly after daybreak, Rick watched the old gray sedan rumble down Champion Road and leave.

Emergency preparedness is a foundation of ARRL Field Days. Up in the Spring Mountains, in the chilly pre-dawn hours, we helped prevent what could have been a devastating forest fire.

It's not tough at all to imagine the scale of the tragedy that could have swept across the Spring Mountains had it not been for Rick, K7FYI, Dave, N2JNR and the crews with Mount Charleston Fire and Rescue.