

## What is the VIP Red Flag Patrol?

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I had the privilege to interview Roxanne Provaznik, Fire Prevention Specialist II with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CDF), also known as CAL FIRE. She is the person that activates the VIP Red Flag Patrols through Rich Beisigl, N6NKJ, Amateur Radio Liaison to CAL FIRE. He then gathers Amateur Radio volunteers to conduct the duties of Red Flag Patrol.

VIP Red Flag Patrol is short for Volunteers In Prevention Red Flag Patrol. A Volunteer In Prevention can be an Amateur Radio operator who drives around and provides additional eyes and ears for CAL FIRE. The volunteers report back to CAL FIRE by way of Amateur Radio. This has been going on since the start of the program. In 1976, a few years after the 1970 Laguna Fire, Battalion Chief Doug Allen approached Art Smith, W6INI, about helping with Red Flag Patrols. These two men created the pilot program, which is now used statewide. They were the fathers of supplemental communications who created the entire program

by using private civilians/radio operators cooperating with CDF. Also, they started the animal rescue program and both programs are now used state wide.

Roxanne has been with CDF 27 years. She runs the Volunteer Prevention Program.

*Question: What is the origin of Amateur Radio in Red Flag Patrol?*

"During holiday patrols like the 4<sup>th</sup> of July or Labor Day where a lot of people with days off gather, the potential for fires is greater and so we patrol. There are three types of patrols that we have and the law enforcement patrol is very low key. We put you out there in civilian clothes being our eyes and ears in key locations to write down personal descriptions, vehicle descriptions and gather as much information as you can in a very inconspicuous way. When people are off work and fire potential is high, we have a 'high visibility' and 'see and be seen' type of thing called our Holiday Patrols — such as the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. The Red Flag Patrol is sort of a weather driven event — wind driven. Typically, we get our high winds from September through April and we get winds with high temperatures with low

humidity, so the slightest spark can start a fire. So if we can have the radio operators out there in the back country and spot the fires quickly, we can respond to them and send everything we have but the kitchen sink and stop them before we get another Cedar Fire. The goal is to get the fire spotted and responded to at an early stage, and this is where Amateur Radio operators fit in.

"We have eight baskets for Amateur Radio operators. In the baskets are binoculars so we can look for smoke and behaviors that may start fires. We have handheld Kestrel Weather Meters so we can check the weather conditions and log them. We have first aid kits, if anyone does happen to get injured. We also have ice chests so they can have ice and cold water. We have compasses so they can figure out where they are and where the smoke is relative to their position. We have forms so they can answer all the questions that I am going to be asking them as far as how big the fire is, what color is the smoke, so they can get all those questions answered when they get on the air so we can get the resources out to them quickly."

*Question: Do you have a story about Amateur Radio?*

"We have been very fortunate that we have had very quiet patrols, which is exactly what we want. We did have an F14 [jet] crash west of Highway 67, and I believe it was one of the Amateur Radio operators that called it in. So we were able to get our resources out there, the Navy was able to get their resources out there to the scene, and that is the whole idea — to identify what is happening and get resources out there to respond quickly."

*Question: When a fire is in progress, what jobs do Amateur Radio operators do?*

"An Amateur Radio operator's job is to help with communications. In the good old days, CDF only had one or two frequencies and they were overtaxed. We used Amateur Radio operators in various positions to help with the

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An exhibit at the California Fire Media Center shows the equipment that firefighters use.

overload. Due to better cell phones and better radios, we have better communications. But what we do now is have supplemental communication but just on the information side of it. So basically at base camp, we put an operator with the team information officer and an operator with every single field information officer and they can communicate back quickly. So when I have a rumor or a question I can get a hold of them and so when we are getting a whole lot of questions at the information center and a header coming up, we can get answers. Amateurs help us focus on communications back to base and give timely accurate information. Cell phones don't always work, but radios are effective. Also, because what you do is listen to radios, there are people available listening whereas with cell phones we could end up having to leave voice mails, and so we don't have that quick effective communication like the radios have."

*Question: So how does the callout work?*

"When winds are blowing county wide, temperatures are up, humidity is low and conditions are right for a fire that is when we know we need it. I will call Rich Beisigl, N6NKJ, because he is the Red Flag Patrol VIP Coordinator and then it is out of my hands. He will make the phone calls. It's a one stop shopping. I make one phone call and Rich coordinates all

the operators to work together. I call Rich and he makes everything happen. Then all we simply do is just get people where we need them, resources where we need them, etc. So it works out very nicely. You guys handle the radios. Ken Tagami, WA6BCC, did it before Rich, and we are extremely happy with all of the good service we have gotten over the years."