

The Catch

COCORAHS -- MORE FIRE, SOME RAIN

Fort Collins, CO — Wednesday, June 27, 2012

Dear CoCoRaHS participants + friends and family,

Many of you have written this week as news of our Colorado catastrophic wildfires spreads. Thanks so much for your caring thoughts and prayers. Here is an update.

Wildfire roared into parts of Colorado Springs yesterday afternoon (about 100 miles south of here) and the CoCoRaHS family has once again been directly affected. Comparing the CoCoRaHS maps for El Paso County, Colorado from yesterday to today, areas of the map north and west from Colorado Springs have gone blank. We have seen this before -- with the 2011 tornadoes and floods and also with fire. When the rainfall maps go blank we know people are hurting. That hits home for all of us. Over 32,000 area residents in and near Colorado Springs have had to flee the fires, and plenty more have done so voluntarily. It is likely that some of our volunteers may have lost homes. Last night, Boulder Colorado was threatened. Today more fires have ignited. This has been an incredible nightmare. Some of you have experience this at other times and in other places.

Here around Fort Collins our huge (nearly 90,000 acres) wild fire has settled down a bit. It is still burning but now it is higher in the mountains and threatening fewer homes. Still, hundreds of families remain evacuated. The Larimer County maps continue to show large blank areas where observers once reported -- just 3 weeks ago. These are indeed terrible disasters -- similar to Texas wildfires last year and other fires this year and previously. With persisting heat and drought (parts of Colorado saw temperatures of 110 or higher for the 4-5th day in a row.) we are not out of the woods. But for our family (back from our Upper Michigan vacation), we are safe, our home and animals are fine, and the worst inconvenience has been the periods of smoke, intense heat and lots of ash in my rain gauge.

Two nights ago I experienced something that is still giving me goose bumps. I worked late and drove home about sunset. To get to and from work I have to drive past the Incident Command post for our fire (called the "High Park fire"). It's just down the road from our building here on the foothills campus of Colorado State University. As the fire spread, firefighting crews increased and the National Guard joined the effort. The Incident Command post grew to become a huge and noisy tent city illuminated day and night. It has been hard to concentrate here with all the activity and with episodes of smoke. Of particular interest were the large helicopters shuttling back and forth -- hovering while reloading fire retardant and then racing off to protect nearby homes. Helicopter activity peaked each time the fire approached residential areas. At last things were quieting down as the active fire zone moved farther away. Driving home I passed what used to be a large, open pasture but now it was the heliport, the heavy equipment staging area, the portable shower and port-a-potty area, the mess tents and the security check point. Beyond that were tents set up with t-shirt sales, refreshments and even portable massage tables to bring some relief to tired and soot-covered firefighters. Then, to my surprise, the road was lined with people -- young and old -- holding up signs and cheering exuberantly for each truck as it returned from the fire to the camp. As I drove past, dozens of large trucks were coming back to camp -- responding to the cheers by honking and sounding sirens. It seemed surreal -- a slight taste of what it might have been like when our young men returned to the U.S. after the end of WW2. I won't forget this.

The smell of rain -- the glorious rainbow

Today, we were surprised by rain. We had thought that nature had perhaps given up on that part of the hydrologic cycle. Several showers moved in dropping temperatures from the 90s back into the 70s and bringing the smell that only fresh rain can bring. The winds then shifted and blew down from the mountains. Instead of the smell of pines -- it was that smell you get when you douse a campfire with a bucket of water. For miles, the forest smelled of wet ashes. The National Weather Service quickly issued a flash flood warning. Even though rainfall was light, runoff from recently burned slopes can bring down ash, mud and much debris. And then, as the day ended, the sun broke through the clouds and there was the brightest, boldest, beautifullest rainbow I've ever seen.

Speaking of the Hydrologic Cycle

With everything that has been going on, I totally forgot to tell you about our new CoCoRaHS video about the Water Cycle. I hope you can spare just 6 minutes to watch this video. Then tell me what you think.

Here is the link:

<http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLBD28578BA99D402A&feature=plcp>

If you like it, tell others -- especially teachers in your community that get to teach kids about the water cycle.

Reporting when it's dry

I realize that there is no great joy or motivation to get up, measure and report when there is nothing in your gauge. But as the spreading drought conditions across much of the country are keenly pointing out, it is VERY important to know that it did not rain. So I encourage you, if you can spare those few extra seconds -- please report your zeros.

Thanks for Drought Impact Reports

That's one of the optional data forms we provide. We're happy to report that more of you have begun using this report to describe the impacts you may be observing. These impact reports go directly to the National Drought Mitigation Center in Lincoln, Nebraska and are used to help interpret the severity of drought across the country.
<http://droughtreporter.unl.edu/>

If you are unusually dry in your area and the dryness is beginning to (or continuing to) cause problems, please tell us about it by submitting an impact report. Thank you for the extra effort. It is appreciated.

Less Drought in Florida

It wasn't long ago that Florida was also dealing with drought. But now with two back-to-back tropical storms this month, drought is a thing of the past -- quickly replaced (in some areas) with excess water. CoCoRaHS volunteers again came through with excellent reports of exceptional rains. Hats off to those of you in those storms that had the presence of mind to go out and empty your gauges midway to make sure

they did not overflow. Yesterday, two of our volunteers in Wakulla County, FL (southwest of Tallahassee near the Gulf Coast) each measured more than 16" of rain in a day. Some of your reports have even ended up on CNN, the Weather Channel and other national news. So if you ever wonder "Is anyone looking at my data?" The answer is always a resounding "Yes!"

CoCoRaHS Blog

For several years, Chris Spears, a highly motivated CoCoRaHS volunteer from the Denver area, maintained the CoCoRaHS Blog. After years of meteorological blogging, Chris is taking a break. But we've decided to keep the blog going. Several people will be helping including our CoCoRaHS state coordinator in Illinois, Steve Hilberg. We'll also try to add some of my e-mails to the blog --- and maybe add a few pictures so you can see our farm, animals, weather, etc. So check in periodically by clicking the little blog icon on our home page.

<http://cocorahs.blogspot.com/>

New posts will begin soon.

Goslings are more fun than geese

Our motherly hen ended up hatching several goslings -- six of which survived. Instead of all hatching at the same time, they were spread out over a couple of weeks. Now we have big goslings, medium sized and small -- all in the same family. Since the hen hatched them the adult geese at first were not interested. But gradually they decided that those youngsters belonged to them. The hen was reluctant at first but eventually turned over the parenting to the geese. Wow, and I thought papa goose used to be mean! Now he'll defend those little guys from everything. If I so much make a gesture towards touching a gosling, I'm toast.

Thanks again for your concern

I greatly appreciate all the message of support and the offers to help in these times of traumatic wildfires in Colorado. We're doing OK but it will be a long road to recovery for some of our CoCoRaHS family. If any of you affected by fire have stories you need to share about your experiences, please let me know.

Have a great summer. May it rain gently -- often enough.

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