

## Braving Florida's Raging Infernos

Input provided by members Newton Nicholson, Chris McCarthy and Murray Cook

**Y**ou've seen it on the news -- the raging fires, the thick black smoke. You can imagine, in your own mind, the heat, the smell, the devastation. What would you do if this happened to you? Would your fields hold up under this kind of pressure? Would you? Here's a first-hand look at what a few of our members in Florida actually DID have to put up with - and how they endured.



Soccer Field at Ormond Beach Recreation Complex

What was once acres and acres of green - trees, grass and other vegetation - now stands black and bleak along the highways, roadways, housing developments and parks. Approximately 435,000 acres of Florida's agricultural land were covered by the fires. That's around 3.2 percent of their total agricultural land but adds up to 11 percent of Brevard and 19 percent of Flagler counties' agricultural land. (These figures were being updated and residential and community property damage totals were still being tabulated at press time.)

The heat and lack of rain combined to create "tinder-box" conditions. Trees that looked green on the outside were actually dry and brittle, and would snap into flames.

Newton Nicholson, Maintenance Supervisor for the City of Daytona Beach, was right in the thick of things. He said that before the fires even started, their football field looked like a desert and he had to replace about 20,000 sq. ft. of sod. Fire came to within 100-200 feet of the stadium and between the ash and embers, he's not sure now how that sod is going to fare.

Murray Cook, Baseball Stadium Manager at

Disney's Wide World of Sports™ complex, in the Orlando area, said they actually had a lightning strike on the sports complex property that started a fire that was visible from the top of the stadium. The call went out immediately and fire crews responded at once, but despite all that, 1 1/2 acres were burned.

Fourth of July fireworks were cancelled in Daytona Beach, Orlando, and surrounding areas. The Disney Theme Parks cancelled their fireworks displays for a full week as an added precaution, even though standard safety measures include the use of a water cannon throughout the day to thoroughly wet down the "landing site."

The Pepsi 400 at the Daytona International Speedway was cancelled because of the fires. Daytona Beach, which is usually



Next to the Parking Lot at Ormond Beach Recreation Complex

packed during the races, was almost deserted. Summer parks concerts and playground activities for children were also cancelled in Daytona Beach.

Ormond Beach, just north of Daytona, suffered severe damage also. At the recreation complex, the

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picnic areas and trees surrounding the soccer fields suffered the most. Luckily, the soccer field itself escaped serious damage.

Back in Daytona Beach, Nicholson was also having a problem with irrigation water. Although the football field is next to the water re-use plant, all available water HAD TO BE be channeled to putting out these fires - lives as well as property were at stake.

Chris McCarthy, Parks Supervisor, City of Sebastian, said that the closest actual fire to them was about 10 miles to the north in a wildlife refuge area

but that the combination of heat (temperatures remain in the upper 90s even now), smoke and the smell of the actual fires made it difficult to be outside for any more than a couple hours at a time.



Picnic area at Ormond Beach Recreation Complex

The heat, smoke and ash throughout the region were a big factor in cancellations of sporting events in many parts of Florida. Exposure, especially during the exertion of practice and competition, were a physical risk. Crew time in that environment needed to be monitored closely.

Masks were provided to McCarthy's crew and it was up to the discretion of each individual to wear them or not. Breaks after about 2 hours were mandatory.

We hear as we get ready to go to press that the rains have begun again and the fires have died down and are under control. Our sports turf managers, and everyone else in the area, can begin anew. Our prayers are with you guys - keep us informed of your progress

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