



**Dusty  
Saunders**

## At best, radio coverage of fires has been poor

June 11, 2002

Contact Dusty Saunders at (303) 892-5137  
or [saunders@RockyMountainNews.com](mailto:saunders@RockyMountainNews.com).

The TV screen was full of images over the weekend that showed Colorado as an exploding inferno.

The pictures were there. Where were the important words on radio?

By and large, Denver's TV stations -- particularly 9News, News4 and 7News -- submersed themselves well in coverage.

But radio -- particularly KOA-AM (850), billed as the 50,000-watt news voice of the West -- was, at times, a whisper.

Sunday afternoon, for example, while smoke and ashes from the Hayman Fire billowed over Denver, Reggie McDaniels' entertainment program was in full swing. And later in the evening, while that tragedy and the Coal Seam Fire in Glenwood Springs raged out of control, Matt Drudge provided his usual syndicated conservative talk-show views.

KOA and the seven other stations operated by Clear Channel provided half-hour updates. But based on the impact of the stories, Clear Channel should have aired consistent, running news reports.

Meanwhile, KNUS-AM (710), a lower-profile news-talk station, had minuscule coverage Sunday because it lacks weekend staffers.

Such non-coverage offers a graphic example of how the radio business has changed.

In the '60s and '70s, radio stations actually competed for local stories. KIMN-AM (950), a rock outlet, had a first-rate news department that gained national recognition under Don Martin.

"Several of our reporters drove mobile units all the time, with the understanding they were always on call to cover news," said Martin, KHOW's former Sky Spy, who retired from radio years ago.

KIMN's major local competitor was KHOW-AM (630). And KOA often was in the reporting mix.

"The problem with today's radio news business is lack of local competition, particularly when a company like Clear Channel operates eight stations in a market," Martin says.

KOA program manager Don Martin (no relation to the former Sky Spy) and Clear Channel news director Jerry Bell vigorously defended the coverage. Martin said KOA received numerous calls and e-mails thanking the station for providing information.

But it wasn't enough.

Meanwhile, 9News was the first to extend its newscasts Sunday. The rest of the stations followed with extended coverage Monday.