

Snapshots

October 2007

BLM

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*Jennifer Smith, editor
Sheri Ascherfeld, layout and design*

Idaho

Rural Fire Departments More Valuable Than Ever in South Central Idaho

In an effort to improve safety and efficiency, Idaho BLM Twin Falls District Fire and Aviation made many significant changes for the 2007 wildfire season. One of these changes included a reconfiguration of wildfire engine crews, giving each engine more experience and leadership, and in turn, the ability to operate independently.

Placing more leadership within each engine crew also meant having to eliminate multiple engines from the total number previously being used in Idaho BLM's Twin Falls District. Where there were formerly 37 engines available to respond to wildfires in south central Idaho, there would now be only 22. Twin Falls District Fire leadership was confident that they could do more with less, given the more experienced crews, and was also committed to improving safety. Still, they began looking at ways to offset this reduction in numbers as well.

The idea was posed that Twin Falls District rely more heavily on the 33 Rural Fire Departments in the 12 counties that they partnered with on a regular basis. Rural Fire Departments (RFDs) respond to approximately 80 percent of wildfires in the Twin Falls District and BLM fire leadership was confident they could be utilized even more.

Under the National Fire Plan's Rural Assistance Program, the RFDs across south central Idaho have been well equipped and trained to be able to safely and

effectively combat wildfires. Twin Falls District BLM has facilitated the Departments' purchase of more than 40 wildfire engines. When an engine is labeled excess, it is then offered to the RFDs, giving them the ability to operate fully in the desert or mountains.

The majority of RFDs employs full time firefighters or has a strong contingent of qualified volunteers to quickly draw from in their communities. At each wildfire they respond to, the BLM also dispatches a Rural Liaison Officer to ensure communications and safety. Consensus was broad that these rural partners could help to fill a gap left with the loss of engines in the Twin Falls District.

The Rural Fire Departments were placed on run cards for initial attack response for the 2007 season; they would be called out just like a federal resource when a new fire broke. When a Department travels out of their own district to assist with a fire, they are compensated from the start. If a blaze lies within their boundaries, they agree to work for two hours before compensation begins. This agreement also runs the other way, with BLM crews volunteering two hours to assist with private land fires when needed as well.

According to Twin Falls District BLM Liaison Officer Larry Messick, rural fire departments are constantly on the lookout for ways to upgrade their capabilities. "Any money they make goes toward helping the department to be more efficient," he said.

Financial considerations aside, this partnership speaks clearly of the character of the rural folks involved. Messick indicates that on a regular basis they will



Jerome Rural Fire Department assists the BLM on a wildfire near Wendell. This heavy engine was purchased from the BLM, giving the Department the ability to fully assist on wildland fires in south central Idaho.



Malta Volunteer Fire Department assists on the Black Pine 2 Fire in early July. Without the help of Rural Fire Departments this summer, Idaho BLM Twin Falls District would have realized a significant gap in resource needs during a busy fire season.



leave their jobs during the day in order to assist their fire department or attend a weekend's worth of training without being paid. This is the caliber of volunteer any organization would love.

“Our guys are very dedicated to serving the community and employers are supportive of the cause too,” Gooding Fire Chief Pat Bishop said. “They have a genuine interest in fighting fire and contributing to the community or they would never come around.”

Examples of this dedication and commitment to partnership can be seen on essentially every wildfire that the BLM Twin Falls District has responded to throughout this summer. Whether conducting structure protection efforts in the wildland urban interface, or actually building line to corral a fire in the brush, the RFDs are there and capable.

“Just about every fire illustrates how valuable they are,” Messick indicates. “It used to be that we only had them serve as standby resources, but now they are directly involved.”

One particular example of the value of RFD resources can be found on the scene of the Elk Mountain Fire, part of what became the 653,100 acre Murphy Complex in July. With fires spread all across the District after a lightning bust, very limited resources were available to send to the vast desert near the Idaho/ Nevada border. BLM Incident Commander Steve Loucks utilized the Castleford and Salmon Tract Fire Departments along the entire eastern flank of the blaze.

“The amazing thing is how it’s really just business as usual when it comes to the Rurals,” Loucks relayed. “They fall right in to the Incident Command System as another resource. They are a definite help when we’re in need.”

At the same time Elk Mountain was beginning, another fire was reported near the opposite end of the Twin Falls District. With every resource otherwise committed, ACE Fire Department was called upon to respond themselves. With a Liaison Officer in tow, they successfully and efficiently contained the blaze.

“These departments have been asked to step up and it’s amazing how well they have,” Messick said.

Looking toward the close of wildfire season 2007, BLM fire leadership and staff across Idaho’s Twin Falls District can thankfully concur.

Agencies Collaborate on Wildland Fire Interpretive Signs

Idaho is one of the fastest growing states in America. In this decade, there have been over 68,000 new homes constructed in the state, and throughout the decade Idaho has been one of the top ten states in population growth. A large portion of this growth occurred in the wildland urban interface. Wildland fire is a common occurrence in Idaho; yet despite the efforts of local, state, and federal agencies many people still do not understand the impacts and effects of wildland fire.

The Boise District BLM and the West Central Highlands Resource Conservation and Development Council (WCHRC&D) have cooperatively worked on wildland fire education efforts for several years. In 2006, the partners began exploring options for placement of interpretive signs that educate citizens and visitors to Idaho about wildland fire. Although there are many aspects of wildland fire that could be addressed in interpretive signs, the partners decided the first sign that they placed would address firewise principles for homes.

The WCHRC&D worked at identifying places to place the signs. The 45th Parallel Information Kiosk was identified as a location for placement through contacts with the New Meadows, Idaho Chamber of Commerce. The kiosk was already in place and had other signs and maps displayed. Through contacts with the city and Chamber of Commerce in Donnelly, Idaho and the Idaho Department of Transportation’s Scenic Byway Program, Donnelly was identified as another location to place a sign. An information kiosk is to be placed in Donnelly during the spring of 2008. After the kiosk is in place



John and Roberta Fields, co-chairs of the 45th Parallel Information Committee, display sign before installation.



a replica of the sign that was placed at the 45th Parallel will be installed at the Donnelly kiosk.

The Boise BLM approached the Payette and Boise National Forests about having a contact number for the New Meadows Ranger District on the 45th Parallel sign and the Cascade Ranger District for the Donnelly kiosk. The U.S. Forest Service provides wildland fire protection in the areas where the signs are located.

The WCHRC&D worked with an Idaho company, Mountain Post Digital Imaging to develop the first sign. Boise District BLM Fire Mitigation Specialist, Bob Narus, provided wildland fire expertise to the WCHRC&D's fire education coordinator, Danny Ebert and Mountain Post Digital Imaging during the development process. The WCHRC&D in cooperation with the Boise District BLM have plans to develop a series of interpretive signs that will be rotated at both sites in the future.

Contact: Bob Narus 208-384-3444

This sign will be displayed at the Donnelly Kiosk in the spring of 2008.



John Fields, Co-Chair of 45th Parallel Information Committee, installs sign.

New Mexico

Leveraging Local, State, and Federal Resources to Reduce Fire Threats to Communities

The National Fire Plan emphasizes projects that improve fire prevention and suppression. The BLM Las Cruces Office in southern New Mexico, rose to this challenge recently by coordinating with local rural volunteer fire departments (VFD's) and their state forestry counterparts on a project that could be simply summarized as "interagency cooperation at its best"

Last year's monsoon rains brought historical levels of grass to the counties of Luna, Grant, and Hidalgo. As a result local fire departments, all of which are staffed by volunteer firefighters, found themselves extremely busy with range fires early in the season. They were not only responding to a large number of fires, but also some of





Interagency strike team: Interagency cooperation at its finest as local, state, and federal resources worked together to tackle a tough wildland fire season.

the largest fires they had seen in years. And, in addition to the long hours associated with suppressing large, fast moving range fires, they were also covering their regular functions including suppressing structure fires and responding to both medical and motor vehicle calls. Add jobs and families to the mix, and it's easy to see how that additional support for the local VFD's was needed.

New Mexico State Forestry and BLM leadership got together and identified not only the seriousness of the need, but the solution as well. To be certain that their strategies would work locally, they called upon a regional wildland fire task force that had been convened to focus on southwestern New Mexico's wildland fire training and coordination needs. This group of local fire chiefs and agency representatives had already been working together, with BLM Ready Reserve funding, to accelerate and advance their volunteers' wildland fire training. Now, the task force was proving its value in



A near record number of large fires taxed the volunteer firefighting resources of southwestern New Mexico.

other ways.

They helped decide that the best alternative to provide relief and support to the VFD's was pre-positioning two separate strike teams of wildland fire engines; one was based in Hidalgo County, the other in Luna County. Each strike team was comprised of a federal agency wildland engine and two contract engines provided by the state. The strike teams responded to wildland fires spread over a 2,500 square mile area containing record fine fuel loads. The task force played an important role in implementing the strike team concept: they became a one-stop shop for consideration of strategies that would support their local resources, they were quickly able to spread the word about the project once decisions were made, and they provided the essential local knowledge and support the strike team's incident commanders needed to be successfully integrated into the local VFD world.

Local fire chiefs were quick to appreciate and praise the assistance they received.

Chief Talavera from Hidalgo County Volunteer Fire Department, and a member of the task force noted, "The whole idea was a great help and a real benefit for the citizens of our county." Chief Talaver served as the initial attack incident commander on the area's largest wildland fire of the season, a fire that grew to 6,000 acres, threatened to shut down I-10, and nearly burned down a number of residences and businesses. When asked how the strike team resources impacted the fire season from his perspective, Chief Talavera's feelings were clear, "The strike teams prevented a number of fires from going big and that is awesome. The help was greatly appreciated."

Tom Nelson, a task force member and chief of the Hachita Volunteer Fire Department, emphatically stated, "Amazing." Chief Nelson, a huge advocate of wildland fire training and a leading interagency cooperator, stated clearly, "It was a management issue. It was hectic and taxing; adding the strike teams into the mix was



hugely beneficial and allowed us to manage the fires the right way.”

“The logistics was a bit of a challenge, but the rewards made it all worthwhile,” said Assistant Fire Management Officer, Tom McKibbin, with BLM. “It was interagency cooperation at its finest. You had the state and federal governments responding to a clear need of the local fire departments. We did it quickly and with no red tape; we had support from every level and from every office.”

When the “152 Fire” broke out near the community of Bayard, Silver City Dispatch was able to mobilize a large number of resources within a short period of time. Operations Section Chief Gary Benavidez was appreciative of the rapid response from the strike teams and eventually the fire was turned over to the Luna County strike team. That ability to transfer fire command freed-up valuable state resources for additional

initial attack responsibilities.

We hear a lot of talk about the National Fire Plan. Here we saw action, a plan, and success. We had 10 fire departments from three counties, along with state and federal agencies all come together to provide fire protection to state, private, and public lands. During the fire season period when the strike teams were in-place, no structures were lost, all fires were contained quickly, no firefighters were injured, and it was done efficiently at all levels.

The Regional Wildland Fire Task Force has proven its value and looks forward to continued success through the Ready Reserve Program. The task force also expects continued coordination and collaboration opportunities between agencies following the 2007 fire season as an example of how to do things right.

