

## NATIVE NEWS FROM ACROSS THE NATION

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Currently, the most important war in America right now is playing out in 12 western states and Native Americans from across the nation are on the front lines. Wildfires are devastating many states and the people who call those states home. By sharing these articles with you, our readers, we hope to draw attention to those courageous Native men and women who have taken the battle personally. They have sacrificed and persevered and in many cases — with a little help from the weather — are leading the way towards ending this war. In each of your hometowns, if given the opportunity, salute them for being so brave and for being an example to our young people. Share your Native pride.

### Indian Firefighters Contribute their Expertise

HAMILTON, MT. (AP) — Drawing on their knowledge of the land and the behavior of wildfires, thousands of American Indians are helping battle the blazes burning across the West.

Firefighting has become a much needed source of revenue — and pride — for Tribes across the country. And at a time when blazes across the West are stretching manpower thin, the Native firefighters play an important role.

"They can carry their weight," said Mike LeBrun, Assistant Fire Management Officer for the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs Rocky Mountain regional office in Billings.

About 4,500 to 5,000 Indians have taken part in the fight against wildfires this summer, said Jim Stires of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. He said that represents about 20 percent of the nation's firefighting force.

Indian crews are well represented among the hundreds of firefighters in Montana's Bitterroot Valley, which is facing one of the West's biggest fires. Blackfeet Indians are here. So are the Gros Ventre, Assiniboine, Chippewa Cree, Kiowa and Choctaw.

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~ Jim Stires  
Bureau of Indian Affairs

Fire has been an integral part of Indian culture, making Indian firefighters particularly well suited for the jobs, said crew boss Dondi Tonasket, 36, a member of the Colville Tribe.

"We used to set our own burns just to cleanse the forest in the past," he said. "Now, our fire knowledge, the way we move through the mountains, is an advantage. We are more aware of the type of situations we could get into, and we're better at remembering ground. It seems to come natural with our crews."

Tonasket, who has been fighting fires for 13 years, keeps his crew in a tight circle of tents — a Circle of Life. "It's the way I treat my crew," said

Tonasket, who learned the celebration-of-life tradition from his Elders. "We stay in the circle, we treat each other as family."

"I guess you could say we're well-adapted to this," said 33-year-old Leonard Foreman, a Kiowa from Carnegie, Oklahoma. "We can adapt to things better because we've had to survive."

Foreman has been fighting fires for the past six years and is on his fifth fire this season. This year, his 29-year-old brother also joined his crew.

"Most of us are related by blood or by marriage," Foreman said. "We learned how to handle pressure a long time ago and work well together because of it."

But it is more than culture and it is more than family. Lloyd Reeves, 68, started fighting fires in the 1950s and returned to camp this year from Montana's Blackfeet Reservation to make some money.

On Indian reservations where unemployment often is staggering — 69 percent on the Blackfeet Reservation — the seasonal work of firefighting for the federal government has become an economic anchor. The salary for firefighters starts at \$10.60 an hour, and rises to as much as \$13.30 an hour for crew bosses.

This year, Reeves' daughter also turned to firefighting, and his wife watches their grandchildren while their daughter is on the fire line.

The huge fires in the Bitterroot Valley are waning, blunted by cool, rainy weather over the Labor Day weekend. But fires continued to burn on more than 400,000 acres in and around the valley, and hundreds of firefighters worked to contain them.

Tonasket's crew of 19 men and one woman received word it is pulling out for a couple of days of rest.

"We made a good reputation for ourselves here," he said.

### Demand for Tribal Firefighters means Welcome Money on Reservation

BROWNING, MT. (AP) — Kenneth Kicking Woman runs a tight ship as supply manager at the Browning Fire Cache. His job is a blessing.

"With this job I was able to get a rental (home), and it's also going to help me get the furniture and things I need for my house without borrowing money," said Kicking Woman, a recovering alcoholic who, after years of unemployment, is earning \$10.68-an-hour outfitting firefighters for the front lines.

Blessing or curse, hardly a soul on the Blackfeet Reservation is unaffected as hundreds of able-bodied men and women ship out to battle one of the nation's fiercest fire seasons ever.

More than 1,700 American Indian firefighters have passed through Kicking Woman's concrete and chain-link fence storeroom, "the cage." He's doled out sleeping bags and emergency fire blankets to merchants, students, and even a former Blackfeet Community College president.

The cache paid out \$300,000 on one day alone this season, a powerful cash infusion for a community where unemployment pushes 75 percent. Fire officials call the local bank three days before payroll so they'll have enough cash.

And the effects are felt well beyond the reservation as firefighters and their families spend at car dealer-

ships and shopping malls. Even Quality Cleaners and Laundry, the Cut Bank business that cleans firefighters' gear, is working around the clock, Owner Jim DeKaye said.

"We have an enormous economic impact on the surrounding communities of Great Falls, Shelby, Cut Bank and Kalispell," Fire Management Officer Calvin Herrera said.

At the center of it all is the Browning Fire Cache. Among the nation's largest reserves of firefighting equipment and manpower, the cache is a wooden warehouse on the outskirts of Browning.

The firefighters' call to arms is the blare of a siren. As a red flag is hoisted up the pole above the cache, firefighters pour in by the dozens, often with families in tow to say their goodbyes.

Even during quiet times, a small group waits outside the cache for their assignments.

Terry Edwards hopes to make \$1,700 to \$2,000 on a fire "camp crew" doing setup and cleanup.

"It will help with school clothes," said Edwards, who sat on a curb outside the cache for more than four hours on a hazy afternoon recently. "I've got three that are going off to high school."

Her niece, Raquel Edwards, is headed for the fire line. She's seen

the training films about what can happen on a treacherous fire.

The lure of adventure and cash is powerful. She plans to make car payments with her earnings, buy her daughter clothes, give her mom money and save what's left over for nursing school.

For the first time since the 1970s, Faughts Blackfeet Trading Post in Browning sold out its entire stock of firefighting boots, roughly 300 pair, and is working on selling their second order.

"We like to see the boom in the economy, but not really because of the fires," Co-Owner Ann Elliott said.

But not everyone is enjoying the bounty.

At Teeple's IGA, Browning's main grocery store, sales are flat.

"People are gone, tourist numbers are way down and when firefighters get paid \$1,500 to \$2,500, they're not going to buy groceries first, they're going to go buy a car," Co-Manager Leo Wikstrom said.

The biggest problem is employee turnover as fire crews are called out.

Wikstrom may shorten store hours and even shut down the bakery or deli.

"If push comes to shove — if we have a choice between keeping the check stands going or decorating cakes — we'll probably keep the

check stands going," he said.

For now, there's one less restaurant in Browning. Sandy Reeves closed her "Sandy's" restaurant to work at the fire cache.

Staffing is also thin at Blackfeet Tribal headquarters. The Tribal Council earlier this month authorized all government employees to take unpaid leave with approval of their immediate supervisors. The forest development program is closed.

The extra firefighting income will ease the pressure on the Tribe's hardship fund for families who need emergency help with medical care, housing and other expenses.

The volunteer fire department expects to earn \$24,000 this fire season through its wildfire-fighting contract with the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The department is paid \$1,500 a day for the use of its largest engine off the reservation.

"This is a perfect opportunity for the small volunteer fire department to make some money, because Browning doesn't have a big tax base to support us," Fire Marshal and Assistant Chief Robert DesRosier said. "It takes a lot of pressure off the local agencies that fund us."

The department probably will use the extra cash to pay off its newest truck and buy sorely needed radios and protective clothing, DesRosier said.