

Tribal crews battle summer blazes

Grand Ronde resources dispatched to help fight fires throughout Northwest

By Dean Rhodes

Smoke Signals editor

While most of us were preparing for pow-wow and enjoying a mild mid-August, about 25 members of the Grand Ronde Wildland Firefighters traveled to heat-seared eastern Oregon, Idaho and Montana to, well, fight fires.

In mid-August, the Tribe's Natural Resources Division dispatched a three-person engine crew to the Warm Springs Indian Reservation in central Oregon to help extinguish hot spots.

Another three-person engine crew went to Burns, prepared for potential fire-starting lightning strikes.

But by far the largest phalanx of Tribal firefighters, a 20-person hand crew, helped fight the 300,000-acre East Zone Complex fire and 99,000-acre Chippy Creek fire in northern Idaho and western Montana, respectively.

Hand crews perform the back-breaking work of digging out fire lines to hopefully stop fires from consuming more territory.

"Every year, we normally have about 29 people out," said Natural Resources Division Manager Mike Wilson.

Jeff Nepstad, Tribal silviculture and protection coordinator, manages the Tribe's firefighting resources, which are part of one of 11 Geographic Area Coordination Centers in the country. He relays available Tribal firefighting resources to officials at the Siuslaw National Forest's headquarters in Corvallis, and they in turn send the information to the Portland office of the Northwest coordination center.

When firefighters or equipment are needed, a request is relayed in reverse order and Tribal firefighting personnel and equipment are dispatched.

Since the fire season in Oregon was relatively mild — especially in western Oregon — most of the

2007 fire program facts

- ◆ The Grand Ronde Fire Program was dispatched to 15 fires this year — four involved the hand crew for 41 days and 11 involved the engines for 122 days.
- ◆ The estimated Bureau of Indian Affairs reimbursement for Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde labor, engine rental, lodging and per diem is \$529,000.
- ◆ The Tribe had 53 red-carded employees this year and Natural Resources Division employees Colby Drake, Jake McKnight, Chuck Chapin, Gabe Clift, Jeremy Ojua, David Harrelson and Bryan Fendall "stepped it up" in supervisory roles.
- ◆ For more information or to apply for next year's Fire Program, contact Jeff Nepstad, Tribal silviculture and protection coordinator, at 503-879-2377 or jeff.nepstad@grandronde.org.

Tribe's firefighting resources ended up in Idaho and Montana, two states particularly affected this summer by forest fires.

"There's been a lot of action in Montana," Wilson said.

At one point, there were 23 large wildfires in Montana and Idaho.

Wilson said the Tribe's fire program has been increasing slowly over the years. "We have a good core of trained and qualified personnel," he said.

Rules allow fire crew members to work for 14 consecutive days in the field, not including travel days going to and coming home from assignments. The jurisdiction in which the fire occurs pays crew member wages and the Tribe receives rental fees for use of its



Tribal employee Roger Slough working on the Chippy Creek fire.

engines. The Tribe's hand crew left Grand Ronde on Aug. 16 and returned just before Labor Day.

"It's job creation and provides revenue for the Tribe," Wilson said.

The Tribe made about \$160,000 on fire engine rentals in 2006, Nepstad said, and averages about \$90,000 in profit each year. He added that no Tribal money is used to support the fire crews; rental fees fund the entire program.

Fire crew personnel train from April through June and then find themselves in the field, battling blazes, in July, August and September as western forests dry out and thunderstorms or human accidents spark fires. In preparation, personnel take five days of interagency training classes conducted by the Bureau of Land Management, Forest Service, state of Oregon and Bureau of Indian Affairs.

"It's hard, dirty work out there, but they have to know their class work," Wilson said. "It's not just grunt work."

"Everybody has to watch every-

body's back," Nepstad said.

Although most firefighters are young men, two women were on this year's Tribal hand crew, which included Tribal and non-Tribal members.

One of the women, 23-year-old Tribal member Becky Weston, said her first year as a hand crew member might affect her future career choice.

A 2002 graduate of North Eugene High School, Weston currently attends Lane Community College and is preparing to transfer to the University of Oregon.

"Since the fire thing, I've been asking myself, 'What do I want to do?'" Weston said.

Weston, the daughter of Tribal member Delores Edwards and her husband, Douglas, said she enjoyed being outdoors, the physical challenge of hiking up to 13 miles in one day while carrying a heavy pack and meeting new people.

On the Chippy Creek fire, Weston worked 14 consecutive 16-hour days, digging fire lines, looking for hot spots and doing grid — walking in a line, separated by about 20 feet from other fire crew members, searching for small fires that could grow into troublesome blazes if not extinguished.

"I enjoyed meeting new people," Weston said. "I was out there with a whole bunch of guys, which was cool. I enjoyed joking around, having a good time. It was my first time and I had everyone helping me out a lot."

Tribal firefighting resources are important every fire season, Wilson said. According to the U.S. Small Business Administration, almost 50 percent of forest firefighters in the United States are Native Americans.

"We ask them to spend 14 days away from their families," Wilson said. "It's a stressful situation. We expect a lot out of them, and they do a great job." ■



Photos courtesy of Jeff Nepstad/Silviculture & Protection Coordinator

Tribal employees Kyle Koonce, left, and Luke Puerini fought fires in northern Idaho and western Montana.