

Department sponsored program since 1990

**FIRE continued
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when his wife went into labor with their first child.

"But, along with the sacrifice comes many rewards, such as camaraderie with your fellow firefighter, travel all over the United States and working for an outstanding organization," Volz said.

Satisfaction with the job also comes because "the feedback is immediate," said Michael Wilson, manager of the Natural Resources Department. "When it's black over here and green right next to it, you see right where you've stopped that fire."

The Natural Resources Department has sponsored the program since 1990, with groups first dispatched the next year. At first, Grand Ronde wildland firefighters worked with firefighters from the Siuslaw National Forest. But, says Jeff Nepstad, Silviculture and Fire Protection Program manager, "to keep better crew cohesiveness, we decided to go out on our own sometime around 2005."

"We're self-sufficient," said Wilson. "It's been a huge change over time."

The program is completely funded with federal payments. Last year, federal agencies sent more than \$1 million in salaries and travel expenses back to the Grand Ronde program; \$156,000 in engine rentals alone.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs purchased the first engine used in Tribal firefighting operations when the program began. The federal government rents the vehicles at rates that have allowed the program to buy another and then another until now there are five engines and four pickups that the Tribal program can bring to a fire. Two engines and more than 10 firefighters are reserved in Grand Ronde for fighting local fires.

Several employees, Volz said, maintain "highly sought-after qualifications – for Incident Com-



Photo courtesy of the Natural Resources Department

Tribal Silviculture & Fire Protection Technician Jay Ojua uses a drip torch to light a backfire while working the Cache Creek Fire near Joseph in August 2012.

mander, Single Resource Boss, Task Force Leader and Strike Team leaders," showing the level of professionalism and depth of talent available in Grand Ronde.

"Firefighters are a small community," said Drake. "You have to work hard to keep your reputation high."

The program has been a point of pride within the Tribe because of this professionalism and because firefighters do one of the dirtiest and most dangerous jobs in the country.

The Grand Ronde Wildland firefighters have been reported by division leaders of the 2012 Cache Creek and Waterfalls 2 fires as high performance, well-organized, outstanding and able to complete every mission requested in a safe, professional manner.

Last year, the warmest on record and the busiest in 20 years for Grand Ronde firefighters, enabled some to earn as much as \$15,000 over the summer months. In the southwest and southern California, said Nepstad, the fire season can stretch from April through November.

In a season with fewer fires, said Wilson, a firefighter might earn no more than \$6,000 and change, though it's not an hour-for-hour summer job. Firefighters are on-call, paid for the time they are out fighting fires.

For newly hired Grand Ronde Wildland firefighters, base pay starts at \$13.18 an hour. Working 16 hours a day with hazard pay on fire assignment can result in substantial paychecks, Wilson said.

Even with pay like that, "It takes a special type of person to keep coming back," said Drake.

"Newly hired firefighters generally make it at least a season," said Nepstad, with five to seven returning each year. Fifteen to 20 seasoned firefighters return annually.

"Interviews and boot camp, and sometimes even a field trip helps let people see if it's for them," said Wilson.

The program has a long history of providing lucrative employment opportunities for Tribal and community members, and at the same time these difficult jobs also provide skills and a level of fitness that make good sense to those involved.

Grand Ronde Wildland firefighters are dispatched across Oregon and the country as needed. Last year, 42 firefighters travelled 62,801 miles to 40 fires in eight different states, including Oregon.

Crews joined the NASA search for pieces of the space shuttle Columbia, which exploded on re-entry in 2003, Nepstad said.

Trained firefighters have come out of the Tribe's Education, Facilities, Natural Resources, Executive Office and Cultural Resources departments. Presently, 54 employees are red-carded and fire ready.

In addition, the program participates in local refuge prescribed burns, considered good practice, said Nepstad.

"We're a big player in the controlled burns in the Willamette Valley refuge system," he said.

This year, the program has set a goal of hiring 10 temporary, on-call firefighters, adding them to the 20 to 25 coming back from the 2012 season.

Though specifically seeking more Tribal member participation, the program is also usually a strong draw for college students looking for summer work. The program tries to accept all with the skills and interest, said Wilson.

Last year, three women – Kylie Hofenbredl, Lindsay Belonga and Ashley Wiens – served as firefighters.

"The Grand Ronde fire program is well-known in the fire world," says Belonga. "It is an honor to be part of such a great program and represent the Tribe throughout the country."

The Tribe's Cultural Protection staff also participates, said Cultural Protection Coordinator Eirik Thorsgard. "We have given class training on how to identify basic cultural resources to avoid or to at least let it be known to the proper authorities that an important cultural site is in the area."

Cultural Protection Specialist David Harrelson also is a summer wildland firefighter and with his training he is able to help identify important sites.

"That's why we keep David red-carded," said Thorsgard. "They're there to save lives, though," he added, "and the first thing is the safety of the firefighters. That takes precedence over everything."

In fact, over the years Grand Ronde firefighters have an impeccable safety record – not a single, time-loss injury in more than 1,600 days, said Wilson.

"With the running up and down hills, with trees falling and rocks rolling, they've done an outstanding job driving over 63,000 miles down dusty roads without a time-loss accident. It's pretty amazing," Wilson added.

Long term, weather experts expect temperatures to keep rising, which many believe will mean continuing fire trouble.

As with the military, Native Americans serve among the nation's federal forest firefighters in wildly disproportionate numbers. Twenty-one percent are Native Americans, said Wilson.

Credit goes to Drake, Logan Kneeland, Jim Pinder and Jay Ojua, "the core that runs the program," said Nepstad. "These four do most of the coordination and getting the fire program ready for the fire season."

"You build a lifelong relationship with (other firefighters)," said Drake.

"They're pretty much a second family," said Kneeland, who was fighting fires for 89 days last summer, the most of anyone in the local program.

"It takes a big team effort," said Wilson. "It's not unusual for me and Michele to be involved with crews in three different states. It's like moving game pieces and a board."

"The size of the program is unique for a western Oregon Tribe with a land base this small," said Wilson. "It takes a lot of commitment from the staff and support from Tribal Council."

"In the summer months," said Volz, "it's all about the fire." ■

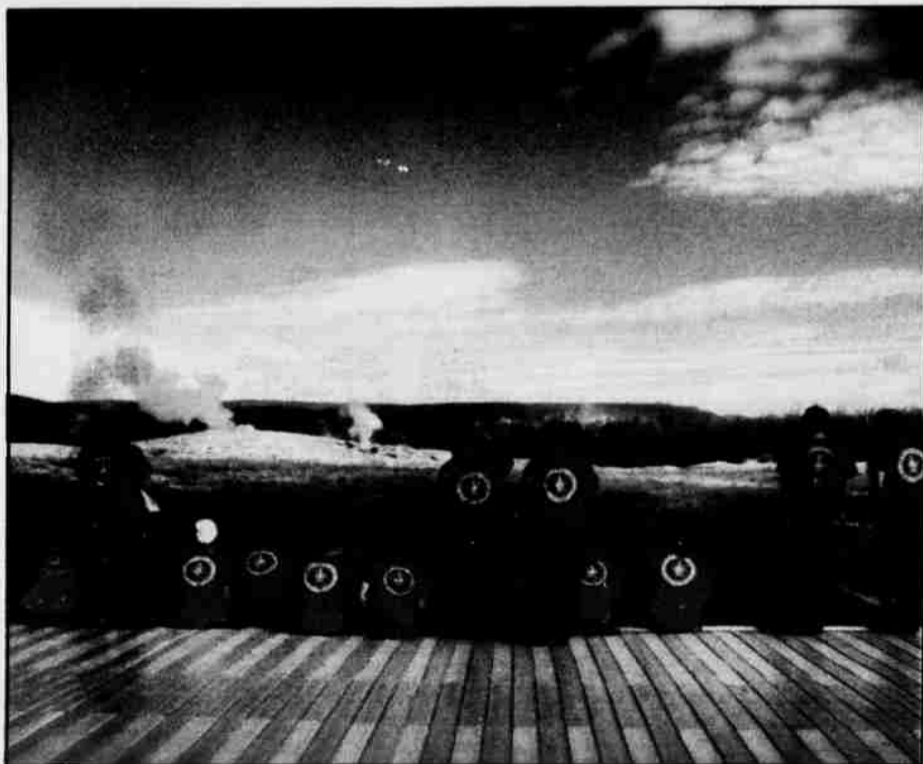


Photo courtesy of Kylie Hofenbredl

Members of the Grand Ronde Tribe's Wildland Firefighters hand crew make a pit stop in Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming to see Old Faithful on the way home from the Colorado Springs Fire in July 2012.