

Nepstad a mentor to many

**NEPSTAD continued
from front page**

August 1989.

"I was in firefighting and forest inventory for the BLM when the position came open with the Tribe," says Nepstad. "I remember it was Cliff Adams, Ray McKnight and Candy Robertson that did my interview in the old manor building. I really loved Ray. He was quite the character."

Nepstad says that when he first arrived in Grand Ronde, he was helping fellow forester Jeff Kuust, who started working for the Tribe one month earlier in July 1989, with timber sales. He says that developing the Tribe's now model firefighting program was a challenge in the beginning.

"We had to get funding for the equipment," says Nepstad. "We contracted out any burning we had to do because we didn't have the people on our own. Cliff slowly built the program and we hired people with council supporting us and that's how we built the department."

Nepstad says that slash burning timber lands is key to good forest health. Trees grow better when the brush around them is removed regularly. This practice became one of the main responsibilities of the Tribe's Silviculture Program that Nepstad leads.

The mission of the Silviculture Program is to promote the Tribal tradition of being good stewards of the land and all natural resources by protecting and maintaining forest health and productivity for future use. The Tribe's Fire Protection Program is self-sufficient and works closely with the Bureau of Indian Affairs' Regional Office and the Oregon Department of Forestry.

Nepstad says that basically everyone in the Natural Resources Department is fire trained. The Tribe's fire protection services now pay for themselves and have become a model for other Tribal fire protection programs throughout the Northwest, he says.

The Tribe sends its firefighting crews to help all over the Northwest. By renting out the Tribe's six firefighting engines, the Tribe pays for all of its own fire protection equipment and needs.

"That is a big plus that it doesn't cost the Tribe anything," says Nepstad.

Kuust says that he remembers the summer of 1989 and that he and Nepstad — they were known as "The Jeffs" at the time — were trying to form their programs in the beginning.

"We were setting up the policies and procedures, and we were setting up the contracts," says Kuust. "I could tell early on that because of his (Nepstad's) background of involvement with fire protection that it would be his strength. I remember we had a lot of energy and we used that. He came from the BLM and I came from the Oregon



Courtesy photo

Jeff Nepstad on the Fly Fire in 2005.

Department of Forestry, and we used that experience to benefit the program."

Kuust says he had a front row seat while Nepstad built the Tribe's Fire Protection Program into one of the best and most successful in the country.

"We have six engines now and a very successful program," Kuust says. "We try to align our efforts with the Tribe's mission and direction. Jeff is responsible for that. I don't think we would have as successful of a program if it weren't for Jeff."

Kuust says Nepstad pays attention to detail. "He focuses on results and he doesn't get distracted. He gets things done."

Natural Resources Department Manager Michael Wilson has worked with Nepstad for 22 years and says it's his dedication that sets him apart from others.

"Jeff has been the driving force in making our fire protection work," Wilson says. "This is something Cliff started and (former Natural Resources manager Pete Wakefield) expanded, but it was really Jeff that put in the time and effort to make it work."

Wilson says Nepstad has put Grand Ronde's fire protection efforts on the map.

"He (Nepstad) knows the fire world well and he is a good firefighter. It's his attention to detail for the contracts and agreements that come into play that make it such a quality program."

Wilson says the firefighting program is well-known and that other Tribes visit to find out how it works

so well for Grand Ronde.

"Some others have struggled," says Wilson. "It takes dedicated staff to make it work. Jeff is the reason it works because he has a strong commitment to see that it works. He wants to keep people safe."

Wilson says that Nepstad's dedication is evident in his coming in to work on a Sunday only to find Nepstad already in his office watching the Bureau of Land Management's live lightning-strike feed on his computer.

"His commitment doesn't end at 5 o'clock," Wilson says.

Silviculture and Fire Protection Program Supervisor Colby Drake has worked with Nepstad since starting with Natural Resources in 2003. Drake says Nepstad

has become a mentor to him over the past 12 years.

"He was my crew boss," Drake says.

Drake worked summers on the Tribe's firefighting crew while he attended Western Oregon University in Monmouth. He started working full-time for the Tribe in 2007.

"In the beginning I kept coming to Jeff and he would help me out, but he did it in a way that helped me learn and be responsible for what I was doing," says Drake. "He basically trained me in most of the things I do now on the job. He has always been a very approachable and available supervisor. We have a good working, professional relationship, but I also know he will be honest with me and that we can talk about things. He's always been flexible with me and we have built that trust in each other."

Drake says Nepstad has always been willing to listen to him whether it's about something personal or professional.

"When I started working for him, I was very shy," says Drake. "After working with and for Jeff for only a few years, I realized that I needed to come out of my shell and be more outgoing. Jeff really helped me become a better supervisor, leader and overall a better person in my life."

Firefighting can be an unforgiving assignment. Drake says, but Nepstad makes things seem possible no matter how tough it becomes.

"Some of the most memorable times I've had while out on fire have been with Jeff. He is always

professional and works hard, but he knows when and how to have a good time when conditions are miserable. He always had some hilarious or off-the-wall story that would make our crew forget about how difficult or bad our situation was."

Drake says its Nepstad's unassuming leadership style that he admires.

"He gives me a chance to do what I need to do. Jeff knows when to take the lead, but he also knows when to let someone struggle through an issue until they have solved it on their own. I really look up to him and I know that he will have my back if it comes down to it and help me with any issues I came to him with."

The other half of Nepstad's job is reforestation.

"After timber is harvested, Jeff's job is to get it replanted," says Wilson. "The replant is vital and he gets the job done right. It's easy for people to see that a lot of work goes into that. It's very important to the future of our Tribe. He's been a very important part of the Natural Resources team."

Nepstad has seen many changes in the department. He and Kuust came into this work together and have watched as growth and the changes that come with growing have shaped the department and its activities.

"With growth, the complexity of everything has changed," says Kuust. "It has been enjoyable to be part of it and the Tribe has treated us well."

Nepstad agrees with Kuust on the magnitude of the changes that have occurred. He says that he sees those changes continuing and becoming more global in nature.

"Fires are bigger nowadays," says Nepstad. "There are larger fires due to global warming and the climate has definitely changed. We started seeing larger fires back in the '90s and even bigger fires in the last 10 years."

Ironically, it's his dedication to the job that has led Nepstad to the decision to retire, but he adds that he will still be around.

"I'm here on the weekends because it's my job," says Nepstad. "If a storm comes through here, I'll be out here too watching for the strikes. You never get your mind out of the game and summers are all about fires, so it's hard to rest during those times. Even after I retire I plan to be on call. If there is a fire, I'll be here."

Drake says he thinks having Nepstad on call after his retirement is a bonus. "Having him available is going to be huge for us," he says.

After dedicating most of his adult life to the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, Nepstad will now turn his dedication to his wife, Lori, and their sons, Kylie, 11, and Brody, 16.

"Our life is all about sports, sports, sports," says Nepstad. "Every weekend we are going to baseball games." ■