

# Revenue will allow upgrades to equipment

## FIRE continued from front page

Drake said that revenue will sustain the Tribe's Fire Protection Program and allow it to make critical upgrades to its firefighting equipment.

He said the program would like to add another engine and possibly upgrade to a more "tactical" type of water tender, which is a water tanker truck that is a specialized firefighting apparatus designed for transporting water to fight fires. A typical tender can transport up to six crew members and carry as much as 3,000 gallons of water.

"We're looking to ramp up a little bit in the coming year," said Drake.

"It's a program that pays for itself," said Tribal Council Chairman Reyn Leno. "Our Fire Protection Program actually started out pretty small and it just kept paying for itself and the money just kept going back into the fire program and that is why we have four trucks now."

Drought conditions in much of the country and a drastically low snowpack in the Pacific Northwest contributed to the record fire season in 2015.

There were 946 fires in Oregon in 2015 that burned more than 95,000 acres. The fires cost the state of Oregon \$76 million.

"It was definitely a busy year," said Natural Resources Manager Michael Wilson. "Everybody, with this dry winter, was anticipating a bad fire season and it really got going in August."

"The whole Northwest was the hot spot of the country this year," said Drake. "At one point we were at over 100 large fires. I don't think I have ever seen it over 100. We were really pressed for national resources. There was a good two-week period there where I believe we were in a state of emergency. We had a two- to three-week period where it was just non-stop."

This year's fire season hasn't ended yet.

"We still have fires going on. We still have two engines out on the Grizzly Complex," said Drake.

The Grizzly Complex Wildfires, which began on Monday, Aug. 10, with lightning strikes around midnight, are located in western Idaho near Coeur d'Alene. As of Thursday, Oct. 8, the Grizzly Complex Wildfires had grown to more than 23,000 acres and were only 14 percent contained.

The Forest Service said the Grizzly fires were the worst in that area since 1927.

Drake said fire season usually gets started in the spring when the Fire Protection Program begins screening and interviewing applicants.

"That's when we start doing our hiring process," said Drake. "We start figuring out how many returners we have coming back, which dictates how many firefighters we are going to hire for our seasonal pool."

"We try to get around 35 seasonal employees, which usually gets us around 55 red-carded firefighting

certified people. We have national standards we have to follow."

Drake said 14 of the 56 firefighters this year were Native American or the parent or spouse of a Tribal member.

"I'm happy with that," said Drake. "We got some good people this year. I think we have a great group of people that are representing the Tribe really well and that reflects in the evaluations that we receive at the end of the tour. We make that a really big priority. We can get the job done when asked."

"It's a great program that provides a lot of jobs," said Wilson. "We've been able to get a fair amount of Tribal members into it. Not everybody can do it. It's hard physically – packing up and down the hills, digging, being close to the heat and the fire."

Wilson said he measures the success of the fire season by every firefighter coming back whole and healthy.

"So far it's been an excellent season," said Wilson. "There are different ways of measuring it – for me it's safety. Crews come back with no serious injuries."

Drake agreed with Wilson. "Overall everything has worked out really well this fire season," said Drake. "We didn't have any safety issues and no major accidents. We had a great safety record again this year. I felt like we really were ready and I feel like we have a great reputation."

Both Drake and Wilson said there is a massive amount of pre-planning and behind-the-scenes work that goes into a successful fire season.

"I felt like we were really prepared even though it was a busy fire season for us," said Drake. "We prepare months in advance for these types of situations. I think that is a big success of our program."

"It's one of the things that I don't think the general public understands that much about fire, fire season and the firefighting business," said Wilson. "So much goes on before fires. We have a plan. We don't wait for an incident to then write a plan."

Wilson said fire crews take care of their gear and sharpen their tools and that they work hard at getting physically fit.

"We are protecting a really important asset here and there is a lot of work that goes into that," said Wilson. "The guys run miles and miles getting into shape and I think that shows the commitment they have so that they can do it."

The reality of wildfires hit close to home this year when the Willamina Creek Fire broke out in August. The fire grew to more than 230 acres and the Tribe's remaining fire engine assisted early in the wildfire.

"Once we found out about the fire when it was in its small stages, we had a patrol out that day," said Drake. "They stayed on the fire from 5 p.m. until 2 a.m. in the morning. They got the initial attack phase done that evening."

Drake said the Tribe's Emergen-

cy Management Team met two to three times daily during that fire to ensure everyone was on top of it and make sure everyone knew their role.

Drake and Wilson said that the Willamina Creek Fire was handled by the Oregon Department of Forestry and that the Tribe's role was only to assist.

Because of the extremely dry conditions for the 2015 fire season, Tribal leadership closed the Reservation three times this summer. Drake said he thinks that is the first time there has been a closure since 1988.

"When we had a fire within four miles of our Reservation it was very clear we were concerned, but having our own fire crews we knew we could take care of our Reservation," said Leno. "It's a reminder that stuff can happen and it can happen fast. I have always felt that with our fire crews we have always had everything pretty much under control."

Wilson said the entire Natural Resources Department works with the Tribe's Legal Department, Finance Department and Tribal Council to make everything happen smoothly.

Wilson said contracts need to be worked out and agreements need to get done with different agencies. He said Tribal Council approved a credit card system so the crews can buy food and gas when they need it so they can stay out on the job.

Wilson credited Senior Administrative Assistant Michelle Volz with getting the crews paid and the Tribe's Treasury Manager Rick Anderson with keeping on top of the credit cards so firefighters never get caught without the balance they need to get the supplies they need.

"Some of those little details can make a successful program," said Wilson.

Drake said Tribal engine crews spent more than 250 days for all three engines out on fires this summer and that the Tribe's hand crews did four full two-week tours and a total of 64 days.

Firefighter Gabe Clift said he spent more than two months out fighting fires this summer.

"I was gone for 70 days," said Clift, 32. "We started out in Detroit Lake with a couple of small fires. The Forest Service needed help with their staffing levels so we went and provided them with additional resources until the fire danger went down. That was a 14-day assignment."

Clift said the firefighting crews become a team and that they have to rely on each other to survive.

"You have to depend on the people with you," said Clift. "I depend on them and they depend on me just as much. We work together and everyone has each other's backs."

"It's a dangerous situation. You have helicopters and planes flying right above you and power lines and not to mention the fire. You start out and you build that camaraderie from the first day of the season and it just grows on itself. Every day of the season you get to work with those same guys. In the end you are like a finely tuned machine."

Leno said Grand Ronde Tribal members have been fighting fires for generations.

"I think people forget that historically and culturally our people have fought fires for a long, long time," said Leno. "I've been proud of our fire crew since it started. It's been a way for us to show we care about Oregon." ■

## Norwegian exchange



Photo by Michelle Alaimo

**Stina Fagertun tells a Norwegian story as Anita Barth-Jorgensen, middle, and Oistein Hanssen play music to accompany the story during a cultural exchange with Grand Ronde in the Tribal gym on Tuesday, Oct. 6. The three are Samis, indigenous people of Norway, and are interested in the similarities and differences between Samis and Native Americans. During their visit they also participated in the noon Chinuk Wawa class at Chachalu Tribal Museum & Cultural Center and visited the plankhouse.**