

British firefighters learn American techniques

JOHN DAY – A firefighting contingent from Great Britain visited the Canyon Creek Complex last week to learn how the United States manages large complex incidents.

Five career firefighters from Hampshire and the Isle of Wight, working for England’s Hampshire Fire and Rescue Service, were chaperoned by Sisters Fire District. They arrived to see operational tactics first hand and learn about the incident command system used to coordinate emergency response among multiple agencies.

Unlike the U.S., which works with several agencies to fight fires, England has one firefighting organization that manages all of the country’s structural and wildland fires.

After arriving in the U.S., the British visitors received an orientation and completed basic firefighting training, which gave them an introduction into U.S. firefighting methods. While visiting the Canyon Creek Complex, they attended a coordination meeting, where leaders from the various cooperating agencies discussed strategic goals.

While they intended only to observe firefighting methods, within the first hour of arriving on the fire line, the Hampshire firefighters were “assigned” a new spot fire, where they worked with local firefighters to line the new fire’s perimeter.

One of the Hampshire firefighters called it a “great honor to work with the Black Mesa Hotshot crew.”

Two of the Hampshire firefighters flew with air operations, touring the fire line, scouting for spot fires and calling in bucket drops. This was a new experience for them because they don’t use aircraft to support their firefighting efforts.

Primarily an urban firefighting force, the Hampshire Fire and Rescue Service rarely has

wildland fires with the size and scope of those that occur in the U.S. In England, they face much smaller and less frequent wildland fires. A 160-acre wildland fire would be large for them, and they would encounter it only about once a decade. Hardwood species, such as maples and oaks, make up much of their forests, and the climate tends to be moist throughout the year.

While the British firefighters may not deal with large fires, they said they saw the opportunity to apply the principles they learned on the Canyon Creek Complex to deal with large incidents, such as flooding.



Contributed photo
A contingent for firefighters from Great Britain get firsthand experience on the Canyon Creek Complex fire.

National Guard crews head to the hills

Some have experience; most are brand new to firefighting

By Tim Trainor
Blue Mountain Eagle

JOHN DAY – For the first time since 2002, Oregon National Guard crews are working firelines in the state.

About 120 men and women split into six crews to pound through ground that had already been scorched by the Canyon Creek Complex fires more than a week ago. They were looking for hot spots and other dangers, such as damaged trees that could drop onto roads or onto future forestry and logging crews.



The Eagle/Tim Trainor
Oregon National Guard troops help mop up the Canyon Creek Complex fire line.

For many, Wednesday was their first time in the field after limited classroom training.

But not all.

Erik Coffey, of Salem, is a soldier in the guard and a student at Chemeketa Community College, currently in between semesters. Coffey, who has a wildland firefighting background, said he may choose to follow that career path in the future.

That made him a leader on the crew Thursday that was doing mop up work on the north edge of the fire. Their work was slow, but steady.

“We’re just trying to do whatever we can,” said Coffey. “A lot of us don’t have much experience, but we’re finding ways to be useful.”

They arrived Wednesday and received brand new yellow and green wildland firefighting uniforms, the only clean ones in fire camp.

Their axes, shovels and Pulaskis were out-of-the-box new, and had never been swung.

Initially, there was some confusion on a lack of supervisors and a clean game plan,

but once they got marching orders, the progress was made clear.

Phillip Raby is one of those supervisors giving marching orders. He is an employee of the U.S. Forest Service based in North Carolina but was dispatched west to deal with the growing number of wildfires in the region.

The National Guard troops, he said, are quick learners.

“The discipline and the motivation are already there,” he said. “That’s key. That’s a big part of the job out here.”

They have good communication skills, he said; they listen to orders and work hard. They’re so good at that, he has to sometimes remind himself how new they are to the field.

“I’ve been with a lot of my crew for 15, 20 years,” he said. “I can point them in a direction and they know what to do.”

It’s not the same with the fresh-out-of-the-box crew, Raby said. Yet.

“They just don’t know the tactics and the techniques yet,” he said. “They need a little more explanation on how best to accomplish what I tell them.”

But day two was much better than day one, said Coffey. And he thinks by the

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