

National Guard soldiers leave from Hermiston to fight fires

By JADE MCDOWELL
NEWS EDITOR

National Guard soldiers from around the Pacific Northwest gathered at the Hermiston armory on Tuesday morning, Sept. 15, before heading out to assist in Oregon’s firefighting efforts.

While some soldiers with previous firefighting experience have been on the fire lines since last week, the 41 members of the 3rd Battalion, 116th Regiment leaving from the Hermiston armory on Sept. 15 were heading to Camp Rilea in Astoria for five days of firefighting training first. They hailed from parts of Oregon, Washington and Idaho.

“We’ve got soldiers that last week were evacuating their own families and now are helping here,” First Lt. Rider Mills of Enumclaw, Washington, said.

Mills said they didn’t know for sure how long they would be gone from their families and jobs — just “as long as they need us.”

Specialist Casey Hayes of Joseph said his employer was “extremely understanding and very supportive” of him leaving to go fight fires.

“We normally have a pretty good guess when the fires start getting as bad as they are that we’ll go out,” he said. “We’re a line of defense for the state.”

Hayes previously worked on the Taylor Creek fire near Grant Pass in 2018, and said they were treated well by the U.S. Forest Service, with good food and good people. He said Guard members there were able to take on the “grunt work,” such as mopping up fire lines and checking for lingering hot spots that could reignite, freeing up the more experienced career firefighters to focus on more complex work.

Specialist Noe Ramirez of Salem said he knows a lot of people over on the west side of the state, who have been evacuated or even had their homes or businesses



Oregon Army National Guard members discuss previous wildfire deployments with Umatilla County Commissioner Bill Elfering on Tuesday, Sept. 15, 2020, at the Oregon National Guard Armory in Hermiston.



The sun shines through the smoke-filled sky above the Oregon National Guard Armory in Hermiston as National Guard members prepare to board a bus to Astoria for firefighting training on Tuesday, Sept. 15, 2020.

burn down. His family also lives in the area and he said he was concerned for them.

“I want to be with my family right now, but I know I’m helping,” he said.

Ramirez has never fought wildfires before, and

said he was excited to learn new skills at Camp Rilea before getting to help with the state’s fire suppression efforts.

After finishing training at Camp Rilea, the soldiers will be deployed to one

of the dozens of wildfires around the state, although they weren’t sure yet where they would end up.



Oregon National Guard Members load their bags onto a bus in preparation for wildland firefighting training in Astoria on Tuesday, Sept. 15, 2020. From Astoria, the National Guard members will join fire crews throughout the state to help battle wildfires.

They left Hermiston shortly before 8:30 a.m. on Sept. 15, with Umatilla County Commissioner

Bill Elfering and Morrow County Commissioner Jim Doherty there to see them off.

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