

NEWS

Language Skills Assessment

What is it & how does it work?

By Charlie Phenix

The diminishing availability of Federal Agency Type II fireline hand crews in the early 1990s sparked the need for private contractors to fill the void. By 2000 there were more than 100 private contract crews fighting fires and assisting in other emergency assignments.

The Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF), which is responsible for protecting the state's privately owned forestland, as well as forests owned by the state, the Bureau of Land Management and several other public entities, retains contracted crews; however, safety issues have come to light over the years concerning the ability of some non-English speaking crews to understand and relay information.

A Matter of Speaking

According to the ODF Web site, the number of Hispanic crews in the Northwest has increased

markedly over the years. Roughly 85 percent of current contract firefighters are of Hispanic descent. (Note: This estimate doesn't indicate how many crewmembers speak English.)

Supervisors on contract crews aren't required to speak any language other than English, but they must be able to communicate with their crew to ensure its safety. It's also essential for supervisors to be able to read and interpret the incident action plan (IAP) and communicate during radio conversations. Consequently, if private companies elect to hire non-English speaking crewmembers, those supervisors must be bilingual or multilingual.

The Issue of Safety

In January 2003 the National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG) noted there were several instances during past fire seasons where firefighters' inability to speak and understand English created a potential safety problem. The NWCG's Safety and Health Working Team made the following recommendations to address this concern:

- All radio communication on fires must be in English.

- All crew leaders must speak, read and write in English, as well as the primary language of their crew.
- The language standard must be applied to agency and contracted resources.

The team carried a motion to "include standards for bilingual capacity and standards for English language use on all fires. This stipulation must be in contracts and in crew typing standards, the Incident Business Management Handbook, the Fireline Handbook and in contracts/emergency equipment rental agreements for private resources."

The NWCG decided it wasn't feasible at the time to specify a uniform means for testing proficiency in the English language. A 2003 NWCG memo, "Bilingual Language Requirements for Crew Leadership" and a 2004 memo equating the "proficiency" language of the 2003 memo with the "bilingual" language serves as the minimum crew standards for national mobilization (as contained in the National Mobilization Guide). These standards provided the framework for the development of the initial testing format.

FireFit Footnotes

How to avoid injury later in life

By Kurt Thompson

I'm probably stating the obvious when I say that fitness injuries become more frequent and problematic as we get older, but no one believes it until they experience it firsthand.

I underwent my first knee surgery in 2004, and last fall I was diagnosed with a bulging disk between my L4/L5 vertebrae, which caused some nerve problems in my right leg. I think I'm still in good shape, but I realize I must do a few things differently—and probably should've been doing them differently all along—to maintain my physical fitness level. Here are a few suggestions that I hope will help you avoid injuries down the road.

- Listen to your body: Be honest with yourself and realize that although you can still hold your own during physical training, you're probably not going to finish first all the time. Sounds simple, but you'll be surprised, when the day comes, at how hard it can be to admit you won't always be No. 1. Don't get me wrong, pushing yourself is important, but listen to your body.
- Keep stretching: Proper stretching is a crucial part of a well-balanced physical fitness routine; our younger firefighters would be wise to make a habit of stretching now, early in life. It takes discipline and often a group effort to ensure we keep up with stretching before and after each workout. If you find it difficult to maintain a stretching routine, enlist the help of a professional at some point for guidance. *Remember:* Stretches can be done improperly, creating a new injury or aggravating an existing injury that the stretches were originally meant to help heal.
- Work smarter, not harder: Old saying, but still true. When we feel strong we tend to forget to use proper mechanics while working out or performing manual labor. Think about every move you make before you make it (i.e., make sure you lift with your legs, twist your back as little as possible, use more than one person when lifting heavy objects, *step* rather than *jump* off the engine and most importantly, if there's a tool or machine available to do the work, use it).
- Visit the FireFit Web site: The FireFit Web site (www.nifc.gov/FireFit/index.htm) contains lots of great information on stretching and overall fitness. Check out the Resources section in the appendices.

Be safe and injury free.

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