



Burning Issues

Summer 2010

ANOTHER LONG-TIME EMPLOYEE RETIRES

So who has worked at NIFC the longest? It all depends on how you count. Earliest hired? Most number of seasons? Longest running full-time? With or without breaks?

One of those “long-timers,” Dale Bitner, retired from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on June 30, after working 41 fire seasons at NIFC. He started off on a fire crew 1969, then moved into BLM Division of Training in 1974.

As a Training Instructor, he helped train BLM, BIA, and NPS employees during the summer months. Then when the FWS started its fire program, Dale was among the first 3 people hired. He came on board as a Training Specialist in 1984.

“There was the Fire Director, a secretary, and me,” said Dale.

During the off-season, Dale worked 33 years as a 7th grade biology teacher and middle school football coach, also coaching track for 32 years and basketball for 14 years.

“It was a good combination of teaching and training, working with the 7th and 8th graders during the year, and adults during the summer,” he said. When he retired from teaching in 2005, he remained with the FWS as a Training Specialist for its Safety and Operations Program until 2010.

He notes that many of his friends still working have also been long-timers, including BLM Safety Manager Stan Palmer; Property Disposal Technician James Adams; Unit Leader Greg Jensen for Fire IT Business Systems; and Stan Legg, Materials Handler Supervisor at the Main Warehouse.

“I think by far they are the people with the longest tenure at NIFC,” he said. “I always said I wanted to be the longest running seasonal employee. Maybe there’s someone else, but I think I made it.”

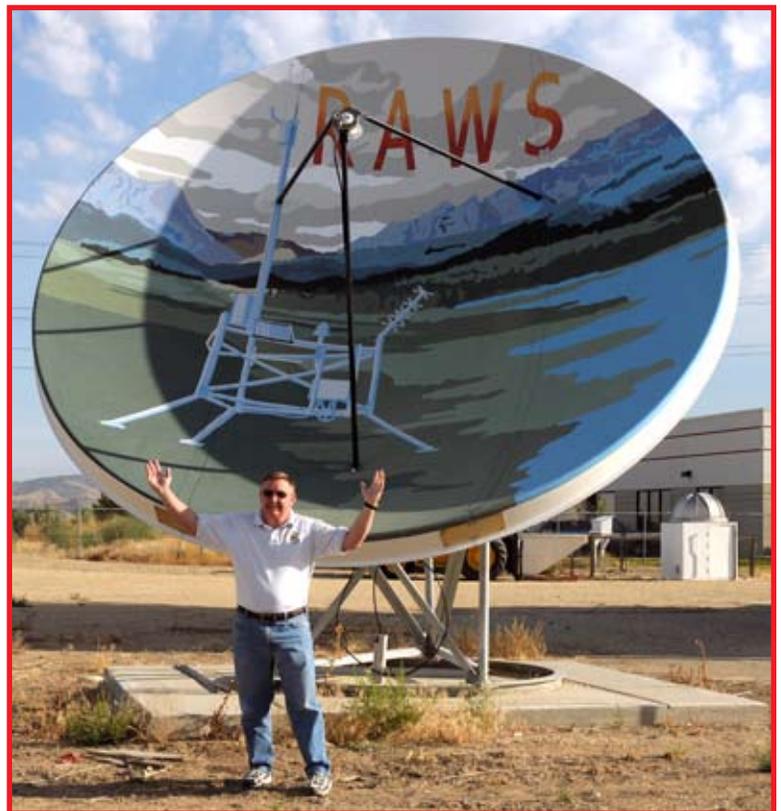
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Dale Bitner in front of the satellite dish on base. A Remote Area Weather Station on a wildlife refuge in eastern Idaho has now been named in his honor. (Cindy Sounders, USFWS)

COMMANDER IN THE PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE CONDUCTS NEEDS ASSESSMENT FOR NWCG RISK MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

Firefighter health and safety is always a top priority. Updates in safety equipment, standards and medical knowledge are consistently being tracked to better the conditions and habits of the firefighters across every agency. The National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG) Risk Management Committee utilizes research and analysis of these topics to inform their decisions. Recently, they sought out the expertise of the U.S. Public Health Service (USPHS) to help assess the need for a physician to assist the NWCG in matters of health and safety.

“This need was seen over a period of time in which several health-related issues were surfacing,” said Chad Fisher, the NPS Wildland Fire Safety and Prevention Program Manager and member of the Risk Management Committee. Chad has been the main liaison in this needs assessment effort. “In 2009 alone we had to react to H1N1 flu virus potential and then we had an outbreak of Norovirus in a fire camp, and it was a real eye-opener for me.”

As a Career Epidemiology Field Officer (CEFO) stationed at the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare, Commander Kris Carter has been conducting research for the past few months. “It’s important to stay focused on the topic and identify if a physician could help solve the issues,” she says. Her work is extensive, where most of it has been interviewing members of the fire community. Meetings with smokejumpers, physiologists, safety managers, fire operations specialists, an industrial hygienist, a medical consultant, as well as all the members of the risk management committee, help gain a broader understanding of people’s needs.

“Individuals were interviewed because of their current use of physicians in their program of work, the potential need for a physician’s services, their ideas of ways to accomplish the work being done or needing to be completed, or their knowledge of the pertinent subject,” explained Chad. “I think it was common for Kris to interview someone on the list who would refer her to another person for more detailed information on a particular topic.”

Kris comes with 10 years of experience in public health, in addition to a Master’s in Preventive Veterinary

Medicine and even a season of firefighting. Kris came to Idaho 8 years ago, as an Epidemic Intelligence Service (EIS) Officer for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and stayed on to become a CEFO. “I love my job,” she says as she jets off to conduct another interview.

Being stationed locally has made it convenient for Kris to conduct her interviews and continue her other service obligations. Like any other uniformed service-member, she can be deployed to fulfill other duties. Recently, she travelled to Tennessee for training in force readiness and deployment, and earlier this summer she spent two weeks in Afghanistan teaching public health.

The National Park Service’s Office of Public Health works with other USPHS Commissioned Corps officers like Commander David Wong and Captain Chuck Higgins. It was a natural step to ask for assistance in conducting the needs assessment from the Public Health Service

“It has been refreshing to have Kris working with us. Her availability gave us an opportunity to use someone from outside the organization that has a background in study design and data analysis.” Chad Fisher explains how this needs assessment has reciprocal gains to both the NWCG and the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare. “Hopefully she will be able to take the knowledge she’s gained from working with us back and apply it within the Idaho Department of Health. This may be the beginning of a mutually beneficial relationship.”

With the work ongoing, the final report will be submitted to the Risk Management Committee sometime this fall. Dissemination of the findings within the NWCG and greater fire community is still being decided. Michelle Ryerson, the Safety Manager for BLM and head of the Risk Management Committee, comments on her anticipation.

“Within the Wildland Safety and Risk Management programs, we often find ourselves in constant reaction mode. To expand our capability and provide wildland fire managers and firefighters with a resource that can assist in medical and occupational health issues through identification and prevention efforts would be of great benefit.”

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THE BLM AND SCOUTS JAM TOGETHER AT THE 2010 NATIONAL SCOUT JAMBOREE

The BLM participated in the 2010 National Scout Jamboree at Fort A.P. Hill, Virginia. All in all, it was a fun, educational, hot and humid experience for everyone involved.

This year's exhibit celebrated the 10th anniversary of the BLM's National Landscape Conservation System. Activities throughout the exhibit included a paleontology activity featuring dinosaur fossils, cultural resources constructing an Anasazi pithouse, simulated cave with cave features and ecology, and Firewise information and home simulations along with a Fire Remote Automated Weather Station (RAWS).

The BLM exhibit was one of many along the Conservation Trail, consisting of several other federal agencies including the US Forest Service, National Park Service and US Fish and Wildlife Service. The purpose of the Conservation Trail was to provide the opportunity for scouts to learn new skills related to conservation activities and to create a better understanding of conservation issues. Over 6,500 scouts and visitors experienced the BLM exhibit this year.

The BLM Firewise activities included homeowner instructions to create a home survivable from wildland fire. Houses were originally setup as not survivable to wildland fire (shake roof, trees touching the home, litter and debris surrounding the home, etc). After instruction, scouts were able to create a survivable home by making improvements to and around the home. Scouts were also able to dial in the weather report from the Fire RAWS and learn about firefighting equipment.

Fire participants for this year's Jamboree involved NIFC employees Elden Alexander, Todd Caperon, RJ Johnson, Stan Legg, John Owens, Toni Rohm, Jennifer Smith and Robbie Swofford. Other fire participants included Mike Chiodini from California, Jennifer Myslivy from New Mexico and Will Worthwine from Idaho.

USFWS also had a booth on the conservation trail which provided activities related to wildlife and fire management. During the Jamboree, they distributed almost 10,000 copies there of a new DVD Managing Fire to Benefit Wildlife and People.



RJ Johnson tells scouts about firefighting tools.



Robbie Swofford interacted with scouts about the uses of a Fire RAWS.



Jennifer Smith explained the Firewise Challenge to the scouts.



The gang (from left to right): Jennifer Myslivy, John Owens, Robbie Swofford, Jennifer Smith and RJ Johnson.

NPS AND FWS NATIONAL AND REGIONAL FIRE MANAGERS MEET TOGETHER FOR FIRST TIME

This past May, both the national and regional fire managers from the National Park Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service met in Fairbanks, Alaska. This was the first time the two groups had met concurrently. Dan Warthin, Regional Fire Management Officer for the National Park Service Alaska Region and Doug Alexander, Regional Fire Management Coordinator for Region 7 of US Fish and Wildlife Service, organized the innovative meeting. “No one had ever done this before, and knowing that both agencies were meeting in Alaska it seemed like a great opportunity for us to meet together,” said Alexander. “And it turned out to be a great success.”

Hosted by the Bureau of Land Management Alaska Fire Service (AFS), the groups met over a period of three days, with one day together dedicated to discussing opportunities where the cooperative efforts between the agencies could be enhanced. The participants from across

the country were briefed on the new Master Cooperative Agreement for Fire Management in Alaska, which was signed in June 2010. “Revising the statewide master cooperative agreement was a great opportunity to clarify and solidify relationships,” said Warthin. Other discussion topics included ways to increase efficiencies within fire management and the agencies’ implementation guidance of fire policy.

The significance of being on-site at BLM’s Alaska Fire Service did not go unnoticed. “As the response provider, AFS is a key member of the fire management ‘equation’ . Without them, the picture would look much different,” explains Bill Kaage, Branch Chief of Wildland Fire for the National Park Service. “Alaska has been successfully at implementing wildland fire response in their environment for a long time. This merely reinforces the good work they have been doing over the years.”



Fire managers from National Park Service, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and BLM Alaska Fire Service tour the smokejumper base at Fort Wainwright before their meeting. Front Row, second from the left: Brian McManus - Branch Chief of Fire Management USFWS, John Gould – Manager AFS, Doug Alexander, Bill Kaage, and Dan Warthin.

NIFC's "AREA 51"

We pass by the 400 Building every day, but how many of us know what really goes on there? Well, it's time the mystery was solved.

The 400 Building houses NIFC's the "Tool Shop" – sometimes called the "Refurb Shop."

An adjunct to the Returns Warehouse, the Tool Shop's mission is the testing, repair, sharpening and refurbishing of various tools and equipment returned from Great Basin fires. The operation is run by Bruce Moyers (a 37-year NIFC veteran) and his crew of eight. In hectic fire seasons, he'll have up to 18 folks working.

"In a busy season," Moyers says, "we'll have tools and equipment stacked up waiting for processing." The Tool Shop will run up to 10 hours a day, 7 days per week, when it's really busy to keep equipment in top shape and available for fire suppression. Some years are busier than others. Last year, for example, the shop handled 5,150 tools.



Bruce Moyers with the Tool Shop's "Pulaski machine."

During the 2000 fire season, the crew handled over 43,000 hand tools. Back in '94, they handled over 63,000 tools.

All hand tools that come through the Tool Shop are cleaned, inspected, sharpened and repackaged. Cracked or worn tool handles are replaced. The Tool Shop has a unique machine that will push out broken Pulaski handles in about 30 seconds and push a new one into the tool head just as quickly. It's a pretty slick machine—and it was invented by the Tool Shop staff years ago.

The Tool Shop crew uses an industrial-grade grinder to put a keen edge on hand tools. If it's not used carefully, that



NIFC's mysterious "400" Building... home to the Tool Shop.

grinder will cut through metal like a hot knife through butter. "Takes quite a bit of training on that machine to use it safely and effectively," Moyers mentions.

Although hand tools are a big part of the group's job, the crew handles a lot more kinds of equipment than you might think. They clean, inspect and repair fold-a-tanks, collapsible water tanks, and other kinds of water handling equipment. Every

hose fitting that comes through the Tool Shop is pressure tested, cleaned, repaired as needed, and repackaged for storage in the Great Basin warehouse next door. The Tool Shop also handles specialty items, like propane heaters, ice chests, gas cans, and drip torches.

When asked what the Tool Shop prides itself on, Moyers gets thoughtful. "Every tool that comes through here eventually gets used," he says. "We make equipment as new as possible—so that it's safe and will get the job done."



Pressure testing hose fittings.



Workers sharpen Pulaskis on the industrial-strength grinder.