



Burning Issues

Spring 2013

SECRETARIES JEWELL AND VILSACK VISIT NIFC FOR FIRE SEASON PREVIEW

DOI Secretary Sally Jewell packed a lot into a short stop in Boise on May 12-13.

She visited the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) to get a western season fire briefing. She met with the nation's top fire managers to discuss policy and practices. She visited the BLM Boise District dispatch center and saw firsthand how initial attack unfolds. She met with local reporters and then held a national news media conference call with 165 participants. And she spent more than an hour in a standing-room-only meeting with DOI employees on her whirlwind visit.

And that's not all. Despite a brimming schedule, she also took to the air with a group of BLM smokejumpers and watched close-up as they completed training jumps on a warm and almost windless Idaho evening.

She was accompanied on the visit by Department of Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, BLM Principal Acting Director Neil Kornze, and several other officials.

The western fire season may be difficult, according to forecasters. Higher-than-normal fire activity is predicted in much of California, the Pacific Northwest, and extending into the Northern Rockies later in the summer.

"It's clear that fire is an enormously important priority," Jewell said.

She also acknowledged other kinds of challenges facing DOI agencies with fire programs. Budget reductions mean fewer people and resources to suppress fires, as well as decreases in reducing fuels in areas prone to fire. Part of the answer to those problems, she said, is continued cooperation among agencies.

"Just as fires know no boundaries, the agencies (at NIFC) know no boundaries," she said. She praised the interagency cooperation in the fire community, noting that the work is seamless "no matter what label is on their shirt."



Secretary Jewell and Secretary Vilsack learn about the National Interagency Coordination Center with Chuck Wamack.

Despite fewer resources, she promised, "We will fight the fires and we will suppress them. But that comes at a cost." In the larger view, Secretary Jewell said she is highly concerned about the lack of funding to continue fuels reduction and prevention work. Without that capability, agencies' ability to conduct a comprehensive fire management program is curtailed.

"It's these kinds of programs that are really taking a hit ... That's what particularly hurts," she said.

Secretary Vilsack also pointed out the potential for an active western season.

"We are going to be facing a difficult fire season. Make no mistake about that," he said.

Sharing resources and "pre-positioning" them will be vital to successful fire management.

"And the folks here (at NIFC) are doing just that, prepositioning the resources, ensuring they are where they're needed."

BLM's Acting Principal Director Kornze also praised the interagency fire effort.

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“The one takeaway I have in the last 24 hours is that it doesn’t matter what agency you work for. We all work together. We all are partners. We all are neighbors. And we have a common mission.”

He also acknowledged the importance of fire management in BLM’s efforts to protect and conserve sagebrush-steppe habitat, particularly in fire-prone areas of the Great Basin.

“It was uplifting for the people at NIFC to hear Secretary Jewell,” said Tim Murphy, BLM Assistant Director for Fire and Aviation. “It’s clear that all aspects of wildfire management are important to her. Her visit helped to set the tone and support morale for a fire season that could be long and difficult.”

That indeed seemed to be one of Secretary Jewell’s primary messages to the fire community.



Smokejumpers get ready for a training flight with the Secretary: (left to right) Diego Calderoni, Tim Murphy, Neil Kornze, John Fremont, Chris Swisher, Secretary Sally Jewell, Ben Oakleaf, Mark Skudlarek, Matt Bowers, Dave Estey and Sergeant Heather Putnam.

“I just want to tell you, I’ve got your back. I’ll keep advocating for you,” she said at the employees’ meeting.

And the training mission with the smokejumpers made a strong impression.

“It’s hard to imagine jumping into a fire ... but these people do it very, very well.”

NIFC EMPLOYEES ENJOY SPRING BBQ

The Fish and Wildlife Service Branch of Fire Management hosted the annual spring barbecue sponsored by the NIFC Employees Association (NEA). More than 200 people were served hamburgers, hot dogs, and the fixings. The net profit for the NEA was \$494.12 and will benefit NIFC employees, families, and retirees.

The FWS has hosted the annual spring and fall barbecues for many years and always does an amazing job. Bob Eaton, deputy chief of the Branch of Fire Management for FWS said "We had one of the largest gatherings that we have ever seen for the FWS barbecue. Thanks to everyone who participated. This luncheon gave folks an opportunity to get outside and enjoy the Idaho sunshine as well as the camaraderie of their fellow employees."



NIFC HOSTS WOUNDED WARRIOR

Thomas Junier, wounded Afghanistan veteran, isn't one to sit around idly and play the waiting game as he goes through the process of being honorably discharged from the Army. Knowing he would be transitioning to civilian life soon, Junier asked the Human Resources office about work he could do at NIFC. Word soon got out that he was looking to do meaningful volunteer work at NIFC to soak up some hours of the day between doctor appointments. After an evaluation of his skills and a tour of NIFC's programs, Junier was placed at the Remote Automated Weather Station (RAWS) shop where he has worked for 18 months.

Junier's work with the RAWS group has truly been a win/win situation for both parties. His volunteer time is filled with assisting the electronic technicians in the calibration and repair of weather sensors used throughout the United States, Guam, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands for fire predictive services and fire incident response.

Robbie Swofford, Junier's direct supervisor, has raves about him. "I can't say enough about Tom, he's hardworking, dependable and a joy to be around. He has been a great addition to our team," said Swofford. On the flip side, Junier has been able to begin his transition back to civilian life, learn some new skills, and build rapport with new people. Junier's ultimate goal is to work himself into a full time position for the government.

Participation in the Wounded Warrior program does not obligate the BLM to offer veterans regular employment; however, the experience they gain by working for the BLM is expected to make the participants more competitive, should they elect to pursue employment with a land management agency in the future.

When workloads at RAWS slowed last fall, Junier helped out in the mail room for a few months. At some point, you may have seen him; tall and broad-shouldered, dressed in an Army battle dress uniform, pushing the mail cart around with a big hairy spider clinging to the front. Hallie Locklear, his supervisor while working there, said repeatedly, "How can you have a bad day with this guy around! His smile brightens every room he walks into!"



Tom Junier served as a military police investigator in Afghanistan.



Thomas's background includes twenty three years as a civilian law enforcement officer, and twelve years as military police investigator for the Army. In addition, he is a former Marine and certified diesel mechanic. Thomas loves spending time outdoors hunting and fishing and rebuilds motorcycles as a hobby. We are very fortunate to have Junier "working" at NIFC!

NIFC EMPLOYEES REMINDED TO REQUEST RADIO FREQUENCIES FOR TRAINING BEFORE USE

If you've ever been trying to talk to someone on a radio and been unexpectedly interrupted by other radio traffic, you've experienced the annoying – and potentially dangerous – problem of radio frequency interference.

Often, this occurs because radio users aren't aware that they need authorization to use frequencies, even when they are programmed in radios that have been assigned to them. This includes NIFC employees, who sometimes use radios for testing, training, and other purposes without requesting authorization from Communications Duty Officers at the National Interagency Incident Communications Division (NIICD) at NIFC.

Radio frequencies are a limited national resource managed by the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) for private, state and local government users and by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) for federal users. The NIFC National Incident Radio Support Cache has been assigned a limited number of VHF FM and UHF FM frequencies in support of wildfires or other types of incidents, including training and all frequency use must be coordinated.

Using a radio frequency requires either a License from the FCC or a Radio Frequency Assignment (RFA) from the NTIA. Authorization can be obtained by contacting a Communications Duty Officer (CDO) at NIICD. Communications Duty Officers are responsible for providing for the safety and well-being of their customers, interference-free radio frequencies and equipment for use on wildfires and other types of incidents. The NIFC CDO has an excellent record, authorizing the use of 1,988 frequencies without interference last year. Please help the NIICD CDOs maintain this record by contacting them to request authorization to use a frequency for testing, training, or other purposes on the NIFC base 30 days in advance. They can be reached by phone at (208) 387-5644 or email at nifccdo@fs.fed.us Many thanks in advance!



THERE'S A DOCTOR IN THE HOUSE! Forest Service Hires Boise Physician To Serve As Medical Officer

While the Forest Service is well known for hiring, well, foresters, the agency doesn't hire health care professionals very often. However, the Forest Service has recently hired a Boise physician to serve in the newly created position of National Medical Qualifications Program Manager at NIFC.

Dr. Jennifer Symonds, currently the only official medical officer in the Forest Service, is responsible for creating medical qualifications and standards for arduous duty wildland firefighters and automation of the health screening questionnaire among other duties. Prior to joining the Forest Service, she worked at urgent care facilities throughout the Treasure Valley. If Jennifer looks familiar, it may be because she treated you or one of your family members for the flu or a broken bone!



Dr. Jennifer Symonds, Forest Service medical officer.

Jennifer learned about, and decided to apply for, the position at NIFC while searching for a government job related to bioterrorism/weapons of mass destruction, one of her areas of interest. This indicates a dark sense of humor, which means she'll fit in well here! Her training, skills, and experience should come in handy here this fire season when many of us will likely be in need of strong migraine medication if the May 1 significant fire potential outlook is any indication!

LEADING THE BIG ONES: PLANES IMPROVE SAFETY, EFFICIENCY IN WILDFIRE SUPPRESSION

Picture this: You're in a small, twin-engine aircraft, heading in a straight line through a smoky, turbulent haze toward a ridge on fire.

One-quarter mile behind you is a 60,000 pound large-airtanker, flying at 150 miles-an-hour carrying almost 3,000 gallons of thick, red retardant. The airtanker crew is depending on you to lead it to the drop target in the safest, most efficient way possible.

For people accustomed to keeping both feet on the ground, the experience amounts to a white-knuckle, heart-pounding, cotton-mouthed venture.

For veteran BLM lead plane pilot Rusty Warbis, it's just another day on the job.

Warbis is one of five BLM lead-plane pilots whose primary job is to fly over a wildfire, size it up, and determine the hazards, headings, altitudes, exits and coverage level for a retardant drop. Then, he usually circles back around and leads the bigger, heavier airtanker to the drop site.

Much depends on the lead-plane pilot: the safety of the airtanker crew; the safety of those on the ground; not to mention his own safety, and that of an air tactical group supervisor (ATGS), who sits in the right-side seat of the lead plane.

"Just by the nature of the program, you feel a lot of responsibility," says Warbis, the flight operations manager for BLM at NIFC.

The lead-plane program began to take form in the mid-1960s. Warbis said large airtankers were crashing too frequently a half-century ago, and the fire-aviation community recognized something needed to change. That change turned out to be using smaller aircraft to scout the fire, set up the details of the drop and lead in the large airtankers.

"Our main purposes are safety and efficiency of the airtanker operations in a high-risk environment," Warbis says. "We coordinate the airspace and try to get the airtankers in and out safely."



The program works well. Improvement in the safety record was immediate and dramatic, once the lead planes took to the air. Until 2012, no large airtanker had crashed with a lead plane assigned to it. That translated to more than 40 years without an incident.

Efficiency is another benefit of the lead-plane program. Before the large airtanker arrives, the lead plane pilot has been in the air, scouting the fire, talking with firefighters on the ground, and has a plan in place when the larger aircraft shows up with a belly-full of retardant.

"We'll already be there, with the target defined. If the airtanker has to talk with a person on the ground to get things in order, it could take three or four turns. That's expensive, when a large airtanker is costing \$5,000 an hour," says Warbis.

After dropping the retardant, the lead plane typically stays in the air while the large airtanker returns to a base for another load. During that time, the lead-plane pilot maintains communications with firefighters on the ground, continuing to scout, assess and refine the next drop.

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Warbis started his fire career as a dozer operator. In 1989, he earned his private pilot's license. Soon afterward, he received his commercial and instructor certificates. The inevitable question was asked: Since you're a pilot, have you ever thought about lead plane work?

It wasn't long before he was flying for BLM.

"At one time, I was qualified as a dozer operator and a lead-plane pilot," he says. "That's not a common set of quals."

Other BLM lead plane pilots are in Redmond, Oregon; Idaho Falls, Idaho; Lancaster, California; and Houston, Texas. In a typical year, they each log almost 400 hours as a lead plane pilot. Their duties can take them anywhere between Florida and Alaska, starting in the spring and continuing into the fall. The Forest Service, CALFIRE and state of Alaska also employ lead-plane pilots.

The lead-plane program has evolved through the years. Warbis was one of the creators of the Aerial Supervision Module (ASM) where the ATGS, who formerly flew in a separate aircraft, now sits next to the lead-plane pilot. Communication is improved with both people in the same aircraft and it eliminates the need for an additional plane.

One thing has not changed through the years. Trust between the pilots of the two planes is still critical.

"Trust is a huge factor with two airplanes working together, especially when one is big and the other is small," says Warbis. "I don't take the trust factor lightly.

Working well with an airtanker crew means a lot and I take it very seriously.

"It's a small community, and if the airtanker pilots begin to lose their trust in you, word gets around fast. Trust is big," Warbis says.

Airtanker captains appreciate the work of those in the lead planes.

"Lead planes are one of our safety assets," says Bob West, an airtanker captain with Neptune Aviation, who has 40 years of flying experience. "Whenever there isn't a lead plane, I always request one. They've always got things planned for us. I can't imagine flying without them."

Warbis adds, "We get lots of requests from large airtanker pilots for our help, especially if it's smoky or the targets aren't well-defined."

The job's challenge is part of the attraction for Warbis and the other lead-plane pilots. No two fires are ever the same, and the tactics vary from drop-to-drop. Add in other challenges – weather, fire behavior, commercial airplane traffic, terrain, and more – and it's clear that piloting a lead plane is a profession that requires just the right combination of skills, awareness and attitude.

"I like the tactical side of the job. It's a performance-based position," Warbis says. "You're only as good as you were yesterday."



BSU CONSTRUCTION MANAGEMENT STUDENTS GET REAL-WORLD EXPERIENCE AT NIFC

Question: What would motivate seven college students to volunteer to spend an afternoon in the rain, working on a construction project?

Answer: The chance to boost their education by working on a real project—not a classroom simulation.

For the past several years, the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) has enjoyed a partnership with the Student Construction Management Club at nearby Boise State University.

The club, which has about 40 members, is a non-profit organization that exists to create opportunities for students to take on construction projects in the community. The recipients of club projects benefit from a source of skilled (and free) labor, while BSU Construction Management club students get practical and realistic work experience on real construction projects.

NIFC facility manager Einar Norton is a big fan of the program. “This is a way to help the students learn, and it benefits the NIFC campus as well,” he said.

BSU students have assisted the BLM at NIFC—the BLM is the Fire Center’s “landlord”—with several construction and maintenance projects. Most recently, they rebuilt part of the walkway in and around the Wildland Firefighter Monument.



Boise State University construction management students work on realigning a walkway at the Wildland Firefighter Monument.

The students’ work is more than just free labor. For each project, the students develop estimates, create project schedules, write and submit a contract, create a project binder, get a notice to proceed from their faculty advisor, work with subcontractors, track job changes, write daily job and safety reports, fill out time cards, prepare safety audit sheets, and take turns supervising work.

“It’s a real world project for us,” said Duel Christiansen, who serves as the Student Project Manager. “We learn what it takes to do a project, start to finish.”

Brandon Pipkin, student club member agreed. “This work is really good. It shows the problems that happen on real world jobs and how you solve them.”

FWS WELCOMES NEW DEPUTY CHIEF



Bob Eaton, deputy chief for the Branch of Fire Management.

Bob Eaton transferred to NIFC in July, 2012 and serves as the new Deputy Chief for the Branch of Fire Management, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. Eaton previously served as the Chief of the Region 4, Division of Fire Management in Atlanta, Georgia.

Eaton began his career as a wildland firefighter in 1976 with the North Carolina Forest Service in western North Carolina while a student at Western Carolina University. He graduated from North Carolina State University with a B.S. degree from the School of Forestry in 1979. Eaton also completed graduate work at Northern Arizona University, Utah State University, and Colorado State University.

Eaton has served 30 years in federal service including 15 years with the Forest Service in Alaska, Washington, Mississippi, Arkansas, Colorado, and Tennessee. He began working for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1998 as the Administrative Forester/District 4 Fire Management Officer at St. Marks National Wildlife in St. Marks, FL. Eaton moved to the Southeast Regional Office in 2001 as the Regional Wildland Urban Interface Coordinator and was appointed the Deputy Chief, Division of Fire Management in 2002. In 2009, he became the Chief, Division of Fire Management. Eaton also served as a Division Supervisor and Safety Officer for the Type 1 Southern Area Incident Management Team (Red Team) for 10 years.

Eaton is married to his wife Wanda, and has two kids, Savannah (12 years old) and Robert (9 years old).

THE WILDLAND FIRE CONNECTION TO THE BOISE BICYCLE PROJECT

On March 21, a group of NIFC employees gathered at lunch to learn some basic and new bicycle maintenance skills. The “Learn and Wrench” event was coordinated by NIFC’s Bike Coordinator, Josh Haney. Jimmy Hallyburton, the Executive Director of the Boise Bike Project (BBP) presented an overview about BBP and then led the hands-on session.

The BBP has an interesting connection to the wildland fire community. Hallyburton, an Idaho native, graduated from Boise State University in 2007 with a degree in Mass Communications and Education. While in college, he was on the Idaho City Hotshots. On a fire in Sun Valley, Idaho in 2007, BBP’s other cofounder, Brian Anderson and Hallyburton began talking about a void in Boise’s bike community, as well as communities throughout the U.S.



In 2010, NIFC was awarded the Bronze Level Award in recognition of being a Bicycle Friendly Business. NIFC was the first organization in Idaho to receive the award.



NIFC employees learning more about basic bike repair. The group reviewed how to fix a flat tire, tighten a chain, adjust handlebars, true wheels and more.

The two cofounders had grown up working in bike shops. They recognized there was a need in Boise for a bicycle repair shop along with the ways to increase bike safety efforts. In October of 2007, with no non-profit experience, they held their first meeting and started the Boise Bicycle Project.

After many long hours, advice from other non-profits, and help from amazing individuals, five years later BBP has been voted as Boise’s best non-profit four times! Additionally, the BBP has purchased its own building, and distributed over 5,000 recycled bicycles back into the community.

BBP is now a fully functional bicycle cooperative that fixes donated bikes from the community and makes available to the community in need. Of interest to all of the NIFC bikers (and their families) is that the staff and volunteers at the project will teach you how to fix your own bike. Check out BBP at: <http://boisebicycleproject.org/welcome.html>.



NIFC at sunset.

BLM SMOKEJUMPERS RECEIVE “AL DUNTON AWARD”

BLM firefighters Ben Oakleaf and Chris Swisher have much in common.

They're both BLM smokejumpers. They both worked on the Midnight Suns Interagency Hotshot Crew in Alaska. They're both highly respected in smokejumping circles. They're both described by their supervisors as having a great work ethic and outstanding attitudes. They've been good friends for about a dozen years, starting when they met while working as hotshots.

And they were both surprised when they were named winners of the “Al Dunton Award,” which honors the late BLM pioneer in fire and aviation management.

“It was a surprise,” says Swisher, who jumps out of Fort Wainwright, Alaska. “I didn't know anything about it until I was told that I won.”

“I didn't even know I was nominated until the jumper manager called me into his office and told me. I was very surprised,” says Oakleaf, who is part of the Great Basin smokejumpers, based in Boise, Idaho.

Part of the reason Swisher and Oakleaf were nominated is due to their work in combining the first-year smokejumper training. For a dozen years, the Alaska and Great Basin rookie jumpers trained separately. That didn't seem the best way to teach the ropes to the new jumpers, Swisher and Oakleaf thought.

“Combined rookie training was done in the past. There's been talk about it through the years, about doing the training that way again,” Oakleaf says. “We both have great respect for the two BLM smokejumper bases. We thought combining the training would be a good thing to do.”

Smokejumper management agreed and Swisher and Oakleaf were given the challenging assignment to make it happen.

The combined rookie training took place in April of 2012 in Alaska. By all accounts, it was a huge success. Combined training is again scheduled for April of this year, in Idaho.

“They were analytical, deliberate, mutually respectful of one another's opinions, and ultimately convincing that the timing was right to give this combined effort another shot,” says Hector Madrid, manager of the Great Basin smokejumpers. “They developed guidelines, the training syllabus, a logistics plan and selected a cadre that shared the same viewpoints about rookie training.”

The effort proved worthwhile, according to Bill Cramer, Alaska smokejumper manager.

“The end result was that we had a strong group of first-year jumpers who came ready to contribute. The training could not have been done any better,” he says.

Great Basin jumpers often help Alaska jumpers in the spring, the peak of the northern fire season. In turn, Alaska jumpers often “boost” firefighting efforts in the Lower 48 during July and August, when the fire season is busiest in the West.

Having the same training and familiarity with one another is a big advantage.



Recipients of the 2013 Al Dunton Award Chris Swisher (left) and Ben Oakleaf (right).

“The more we know each other and about each other, the more seamless it is when we integrate the crews,” says Oakleaf.

But it was more than the combined rookie training that distinguishes Swisher and Oakleaf. Their supervisors say the two excel in every aspect of the smokejumping program.

“He seeks challenges, he accepts responsibility, he always looks for ways to improve,” says Cramer of his colleague Swisher. “That's what resonates with me. It's not just what he did in 2012, but the way he continually performs his job.

“He's humble, without reason to be,” Cramer adds. “From his perspective, he just shows up and tries to do his job the best way he can. He doesn't think he's anyone special.”

Madrid is equal in his praise of Oakleaf.

“Ben's strength is that he leads by example. No matter his experience, he's never been above or beyond doing a task. He has great firefighting and jumping skills. He's the full package,” says Madrid. “His attitude is second to none. He's never in a bad mood, never had a bad moment, no matter the situation.”

The “Al Dunton Award” was established last year. Dunton was a rookie smokejumper in Fairbanks in 1967. He managed the smokejumper base there from 1972 through 1984 and remained active in fire management throughout his career. Much of BLM's success in fire management can be traced back to Dunton's work and innovations. The award was established by the interagency smokejumper base managers and the National Smokejumper Association, with the support of Al Dunton's wife, Mary, and other family members.

Last year's BLM winner was Gary Baumgartner.

The respect level is high between the award recipients.

“On a personal note, (organizing) the combined rookie training was fun to do with Chris. We've been good friends now for a long time,” Oakleaf says.

“I think there are more worthy people than me,” says Swisher, “but I'm glad that Ben was chosen.”

Says Cramer of the two, “I wish we could put them in a copy machine and duplicate them. Of course, if we did, the rest of us might be out of a job.”