



IN THE FIELD



Imagine your phone ringing, not for the first time that day, or even the tenth time, but the one hundredth time. Central Oregon Interagency Dispatch Center (COIDC)'s Lead Initial Attack Dispatcher, Sam McKenzie, finds himself doing this many days throughout the summer. McKenzie, who has been in dispatch for five years, says a single desk can receive anywhere between 120 – 300 phone and radio calls during a typical day in the middle of fire season.

"Dispatch isn't for everybody," McKenzie asserts. "You have to want to do it."

McKenzie, after retiring from military service, joined the Forest Service in 2008. He spent three seasons working on fire crews, engines and helitack on the Ochoco National Forest, and as part of the larger Central Oregon Fire Management Service (COFMS). Some of his favorite experiences with the agency came

from this time.

Dispatched to a wilderness fire in John Day, McKenzie remembers spiking out in the backcountry, cutting line for five days with his Type 2 initial attack hand crew. He also recalls an assignment up to the Snoqualmie area in Washington where the deep duff kept the fire burning and proved challenging for line construction.

Now McKenzie's on the other side of things—he's the one ordering resources and sending crews to incidents. As an initial attack dispatcher he is responsible for sending resources to an incident and

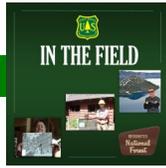


Sam McKenzie
COIDC Initial Attack Dispatcher

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monitoring their needs for the first 24 hours, or longer, in the case of extended attack. He orders up the initial resources needed to suppress or attack a fire as desired, and then monitors the requests from the incident commander on-scene. If they need additional resources, McKenzie's the man who orders them up and gets wheels, wings or rotors rolling to the incident.

During a typical day in the middle of fire season, McKenzie and other dispatchers arrive at the COIDC, located at the Prineville Airport, by seven a.m. They spend their entire day on the phone and radio, tracking fire resources, dispatching crews to new incidents and monitoring existing incidents.



In the off-season, things are a bit less chaotic. McKenzie spends his days tracking the travel of the Forest Service's administrative staff, as well as, preparing for the next fire season. He gathers up lessons learned and After Action Reviews from the previous season to help improve operations plans and mobilization strategies for the upcoming season.

When he's not in midst of fire season or preparing for the next one, McKenzie's probably outside.

"Most of my hobbies are outdoor-related," he explains. "I have a great love of the outdoors and conservation. I love hunting, hiking, camping and backpacking—anything to get outside."

Throughout his time at COIDC McKenzie has also helped implement an upgraded computer system, as well as, served as technical support services lead for region 6 hiring process. But his favorite part of the job is oddly enough, the challenges—he knows each summer will never be the same as the previous one.

Although he loves his position, McKenzie cautions that dispatch really isn't for everyone. Those interested in the field must be ready work with the public and know how to handle intense pressure. He can recall one lightning bust that produced 162 new fires! As a result of the extreme conditions dispatchers often have to work under, McKenzie believes you have to be dedicated to the career. While he says a background in wildland firefighting isn't required, it definitely helps. Most importantly, in looking for dispatch jobs or other positions in the agency, McKenzie instructs that you have to aggressively go after whatever it is you want.

"The Forest Service, fire specifically," believes McKenzie, "is one of the few places where you're not handed anything. It's up to you to figure out where you want to be and go after it."

For those interested in getting a position similar to his, McKenzie suggests that they get familiar with the application process. He also says that it's helpful to find a mentor—someone who can give information about job openings and career advice. McKenzie believes that setting goals is one of the most important things people can do in terms of reaching where they would like to be in a fire or dispatch-related career. For McKenzie, he believes in not only helping to educate those just entering the field, but in carrying out his own job to the best of his abilities.

"I've spent my entire adult life in public service," McKenzie declares. "And I'm dedicated to it. As a public servant I'm helping to provide the public a forest that can be used for recreation."