

FOREST SPOTLIGHT

Modoc NF – Pacific Southwest Region
225 W. 8th St. Alturas, CA 96101

January 28th, 2020
<https://www.fs.usda.gov/modoc>

Modoc's Oldest Firefighter – Don Mason

For 39 years Don Mason taught special education around California. Most of those years were in between seasonal Forest Service jobs. He is on the local school board and volunteers as a coach at Modoc High School where he started the Modoc Special Olympics and the “Nor-Cal” Running Program. Mason and his wife enjoy a robust outdoor lifestyle in and around Alturas. He has survived stage four cancer twice and states that of 30+ seasons with the Forest Service, “...it has not ever felt like a job but more like a paid vacation. I’ve spent thousands of days in the woods plus created some great friendships.” Mason is now a contracted employee, a Resource Advisor on incidents around the Forest and can still pass an arduous pack-test, required of all firefighters, as he approaches 70.



When did you start with the Forest Service and what was your first job?

I started in 1969 on the Truckee Ranger District of the Tahoe National Forest as part of Recreation but we spent more time on fire. It was a different time then. We didn't have NOMEX. We would ride horses into Desolation Valley Wilderness to fires out of Meeks Bay on Lake Tahoe. Numerous times they would fly me into a single tree lightning fire, drop me off and leave. Sometimes I would work that fire up to three days before I could hike out.

What is your favorite breakfast food? When I'm not working it's usually some fruit and Life cereal. I am not a big junk food eater. I am fortunate to have my health and want to keep it that way as long as I can.

What were some challenges in transitioning to new jobs or roles within the Forest Service?

Having numerous jobs and bosses over 30 seasons; it's always a challenge to adapt to new supervisors and their management style. What I have appreciated most is when my bosses critique me in a manner where I felt comfortable to the point where I'd gladly go out and have a beer with that person afterwards.

Any advice for someone new or looking to work with the Forest Service? You have to be flexible. Over the years I have learned that whatever plan you have will more than likely change. That's just the nature of things and I think it can be said with just about any job within, or outside of, the agency. In addition, I would suggest training in the field you want to work in. The more qualifications you have the more qualified you are. In regard to becoming a firefighter, the best advice I can give is be ready for long hours, being dirty and poor food. Here again be flexible because things seem to change constantly. If you don't like hard work, this is not the job for you.