

BOOTS ON THE GROUND

NAME: Brian Cardoza

POSITION: Idaho City Hotshots Superintendent

PHOTO LOCATION: Idaho City Ranger District // Boise National Forest



CAPTION: Brian Cardoza's wildland firefighting boots have seen seasons of grueling hikes, long days of cutting fire line and weeks away from home spent on fire assignments as the superintendent of the Idaho City Hotshots.

"We spend so much time in our boots, they have to last," Idaho City Hotshots Superintendent Brian Cardoza says as he looks down the worn, dirt-coated leather boots that poke out from the hems of his green Nomex pants. With nearly 25 years of wildland firefighting experience, Cardoza is a man who knows his boots.

Growing up in the tiny mountain community of Lake Isabella, California, Brian Cardoza was immersed in the world of wildland firefighting from a very early age. His dad worked for the Forest Service for fourteen years before taking a position in the state office of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Cardoza began his own career on BLM's Kern Valley Hotshots in 1991 the day after graduating from high school. In 2006 he moved to the Forest Service's Fulton Hotshots, a crew based on the Sequoia National Forest, which surrounds his hometown.

After several seasons with Fulton, one with the Rio Bravo Hotshots and a few with the BLM in Colorado, Cardoza took a position as a captain for the Idaho City Hotshots in 2002. He was promoted to superintendent in 2005.

Established in 2001, the Idaho City Hotshots are a Type 1 wildland firefighting resource composed of 20 crew members. By definition, a hotshot crew is a highly skilled and physically fit module with specialized training that allows them to conduct fire suppression work in some of the roughest terrain in the country. Based out of the Idaho City Ranger District on the Boise National Forest, the Idaho City Hotshots respond to both local and national incidents.

According to Cardoza, there are two types of ideal days as a hotshot superintendent. On the days when their crew is not assigned to an incident, the hotshots focus on maintaining fitness levels and building their skillset. For Cardoza, this means coming into work and starting the day with a physical training (PT) excise, usually a hike or run. After that he takes his crew into the field to complete project work, generally thinning, constructing trail or a training exercise. At the end of days like these, he's able to see his crew developing.



Most days during the summer, however, are spent on fire assignments. Cardoza outlines his perfect fire day in a few simple steps. He wakes up before sunrise and heads to briefing where he receives the day's objectives from division leaders. From there he takes his crew out to the fire, where they spend the day cutting line or back-burning. The most crucial aspect of the day, for Cardoza, is making good decisions that ensure everyone stays safe and returns to camp in the evening.

“I enjoy fires with a lot of action,” Cardoza says with a wide grin as he recollects some of his favorite moments on the job.

One of his favorite assignments was 2013’s Elk Fire, located on the Boise National Forest. The Elk Fire spread across more than 100,000 acres in less than a week. Eventually, the fire ran into the burned out area of the Trinity Ridge Fire, an incident that Cardoza and his crew had worked on the previous year. During four days of completing burn out operations around the town of Featherville, Cardoza was able to utilize a pre-existing line and fuel break that his crew had constructed during the Trinity Ridge Fire, but had not needed. For Cardoza, it was great to work with local resources on his home forest, an area that is important to him, both on and off the clock.

“I live to hunt,” Cardoza states matter-of-factly. “I have an eight-years-old son and I love doing anything outdoors with him.”

Although his son is still in elementary school, it’s apparent that he’s inherited the family fire gene. During the Salt Fire on the Salmon-Challis National Forest in 2011, Cardoza called home to his young son. He explained that despite a week of hard work, his crew was making very little progress on the fire. His son, having driven by a roadside fire being extinguished with water a few days prior, had some simple advice for his dad.

“Dad, just take your hotshots, put some hose out, squirt some water on the fire and come home.”

Cardoza explained to his son that his crew was in a remote location, hiking into areas far from roads or civilization. However, a few days later, Cardoza began to notice an abundance of wet drainages throughout the fire. He decided to sling in a handful of Mark 3 pumps and hose, ultimately controlling the blaze just as his son had suggested.

“As a hot shot it’s a very rewarding job,” Cardoza expresses. “We have a clear objective from fire management. We work hard to achieve it, and when we do, it’s a great reward for the guys.”

For those interested in becoming a hotshot, Cardoza has some simple advice. He recommends that you spend the winter before you apply visiting crews and getting to know people. It’s important that you find a crew you think you’d fit in with, as you’ll be spending a lot of time with them. After that, it’s a matter of being mentally and physically prepared—that means being ready for hard work and many days spent away from home.

For Cardoza, one of the best parts about being on a hotshot crew is the cadre and comradeship among the crew members. He enjoys watching his crew during critical training as they prepare for fire season. Throughout this crucial period they begin to work together and find a rhythm, one that carries them throughout the summer on a variety of assignments.

“Working for the Forest Service,” says Cardoza as he looks around the Idaho City Hotshot’s office, “is a great job.”