

“Success Means Everyone Returns Home Safely”...Tom Tidwell, Forest Service Chief

On Monday, a group of students assembled in a classroom. “Good Morning everyone, my name is Dan and here next to me is my friend Grumpy...Welcome to fire school.”



(Trucks line up to unload fire gear, Photo by Ben Martinez)

My name is Benjamin and I was hired as an Intern in Public Affairs with the U.S. Forest Service in Delta, Colorado. Being a part of the Forest Service is something special, because you are in the outdoors experiencing nature and learning about the National Forests. Not only that, but you are embraced with so many new concepts and introduced to different styles of training. As an Intern, I had the opportunity to observe and participate in one of the many options for training they have to offer-in this case, firefighter training. I jumped at the opening-no questions asked- sign me up!

Being able to participate in something like this was incredible. I thought I would document the experience. The class was held in the Montrose County Fairgrounds and started promptly at 8 a.m. every day, finishing up at 5 p.m.

The first day of fire school was pretty basic in the sense of entering into the early stages of training. The instructors introduced themselves and stated why they were the ones teaching the class. Then, everyone in the room went around and introduced him or herself. The instructors went over the schedule and which course would be first in the “to do” list.

The first course was S-190, “Introduction to Wildland Fire Behavior” and at the end of the day, there would be a short test. The book was what it stated, an introduction. It taught the basic concepts of wildland fire and the principles of wildland fire behavior. This includes topographic influences; fuels and weather; and safety. To go along with the workbook, the instructors had PowerPoints for each objective. They made the class extremely enjoyable throughout the day and were very helpful when answering questions. The end of the day was nearing and with time reaching 5 p.m. it was time to take the test. The next day Dan announced to the class that everyone had passed with flying colors.

On Tuesday the S-130, “Firefighter Training” course began. Once again, PowerPoint’s were shown with lots of questions, complemented by detailed answers. Compared to S-190, which had three main objectives, the S-130 course brought those to life in 18 detailed unit lessons. The next four days, minds would be overloaded with information on how to fight fire.

The main aspects that were stressed throughout the course were to have strong communications; a solid sense of situational awareness; and to be safe above everything else.

Other aspects that go along with learning how to fight fire include the use of: hand tools, firing devices, water, suppression tactics and how to secure the fire line and pinch off the head of the fire as firefighters work their way up the line. With these in mind, firefighters can manage fires. There are also ways to clean up after a fire, called “mop up.”

A fire can occur several ways. The way to contain it is generally the same- tools on the ground and hard work. Two different squads will make an anchor point, (which is in a safe place from where the fire has originated or where the likelihood of safe line construction can begin). Then each squad will flank the fire on the right

and left side of it, digging a line about 12 to 18 inches wide and to mineral soil (bare dirt). This line helps prevent the fire from jumping the fire line and burning more area. Firefighters work their way up to the head of the fire, pinch it off and then “fight fire with fire.”

On Wednesday, students were able to experience hands-on situations. Four groups were divided among the class and each group spent time at four stations. One group learned about how to use radios to communicate; another group learned about water suppression; while another, practiced throwing out “hose lays,” connecting them together then spraying water onto the field. In the last group, students learned what types of tool are used to dig fire line. Firefighters have an array of tools they can choose from to help dig line and many experiment with constructing new tools. The main tool is a Pulaski, a type of pickax on one edge and an axe on the other.

Students were taught to sharpen and fix tools as well. In the last station students were able to experience three other tools a firefighter will use to help contain fire: fusees [fuse-ease], a drip torch and a flare gun. Fusees are relatively easy to use and ignite; they are used in signaling or starting a prescribed fire or “burning out” fuel between the fireline and the main burn. Flare guns can be used for the same purpose from a greater distance and a drip torch is often used on prescribed burns to ignite brush and vegetation.

The following day students learned about the fire shelter. A fire shelter is something that is only used in extremely dangerous fire situations and as a last resort for protection. It is carried by a firefighter at all times and should be inspected every two weeks to ensure it is in good condition. A fire shelter is made of aluminum foil, backed by fiberglass and silica weave material that reflects heat away from the shelter. A layer of air separates this layer of foil and silica from an inner layer of foil laminated to fiberglass.

On the last day, students must take a final exam and participate in a field day exercise. A dozen experienced firefighters took students out into the forest to practice. The students were put into squads with different crew leaders and given Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). This includes a pack, leather gloves, a hard

hat, boots, Nomex long sleeve shirts and pants (Nomex is fire retardant clothing) and a fire shelter.



(Students in full PPE head up the line, Photo by Ben Martinez)

Going into the field the students set up as though they were about to fight a real fire. An Incident Commander (IC), briefs the crew boss; the crew boss then briefs the students. The students and their crew leaders flank the fire, digging line with hand tools. Students also search for other fires that may jump over the fire line, known as spot fires. After speaking with students, this was among their favorite day of the week. They enjoyed being hands-on and out in the field. After satisfactorily completing this day and taking an additional on-line course, the students were officially qualified to fight wildland fires.

This experience was extremely beneficial to the young men and women participating. I can't say enough how grateful I am to have been a part of something so big and the continuous opportunities the U.S. Forest Service provides for young and interested minds and bodies.

Written by Ben Martinez