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COMMUNITIES

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Fire's Front Lines

A Day in the Life of a Forest Service Wildland Fire Crew
story and photos by Beth Steinhauer

"We stress safety on our forest. This program...trains our bodies for the strenuous tasks we do, and lets us perform our jobs more safely and efficiently."

Andy Cureton, Tim Haas, David Riley, Jamie Barnes, Rustin Nordsven of the Northern Hills fire crew display the tools of their trade.

On a hot summer day at 9 a.m. sharp, the Northern Hills of South Dakota fire crew gears up for an hour of physical training (PT). They change into their PT workout clothes, stretch, and take off on their morning run. Halfway through, the crew is already drenched with sweat, but encouraging words are passed down the chain as the last member sprints up "killer hill." The Northern Hills crew is now in its final months of the 2009 fire season. The season has been slower than usual, but even so the crew works hard to prepare for fires.

"There's really nothing more important or more useful to a firefighter than being in good shape, and having a well-rounded PT and nutritional program," says Jamie Barnes, Northern Hills Assistant Engine Captain and PT coordinator.

The physical training program has played a significant role in decreasing injuries and accidents on and off the job. "We stress safety on our forest. This program, along with eating right and getting enough sleep, trains our bodies for the strenuous tasks we do, and lets us perform our jobs more safely and efficiently."

Why so? Well, in addition to the obvious need for endurance, strength is another requirement; one practiced by this team through "tire flipping." "Being able to pick up something heavy and move it is one of the core challenges for a firefighter, whether on a fire or while doing project work," said Barnes. "Flipping tires teaches us to lift heavy objects safely, so when we're out on a fire we can move something heavy, like a log, with less chance of an injury."



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cutting with no prior experience, or being on a fire for the first time, is a learning experience.”

Above, Jamie Barnes flips tires as part of the PT program; the exercise is good practice for lifting logs or downed trees in a fire. Above right, Tim Haas, Codey Hines, Chip Harris, Rustin Nordsven, David Riley, Andy Cureton and Jamie Barnes on a run for morning PT.

After PT comes the change from workout clothes into the team’s firefighting Nomex: a special type of fire-resistant material. In older days it was common to see firefighters on the line in jeans and a t-shirt. As time and equipment progressed, Nomex gear became the standard, promoting safety in a sometimes unsafe and unforgiving environment.

Taking their seats in one of the engine hangers, crews face a wall where a whiteboard displays the daily weather, personnel, and fire reports. Tim Haas, Northern Hills Captain, reads off the weather report. Other reports are read, including a review of local and national fire activity. After the fire briefing, the crew does a Job Hazard Analysis (JHA), which establishes proper job procedures. The crews carefully study and record each step of a job, identifying any existing or potential hazards, and determining the safest way to perform the job by reducing or eliminating hazards. Then the real work begins.

The engine horns blare and the lights flash on and off. All the fire engines are loaded and checked before a crew heads out to the project site. The crew travels to a burn prep project: the Limestone Rx, on Northern Hills Ranger District.

“On this unit, about 1,100 acres are set aside for burn treatment, which will happen in either the fall or spring, depending on when the windows are available and the fuels are right,” says Chip Harris, Northern Hills Engine Captain. “Fire once played a natural role in the ecosystem, and happened on a pretty frequent basis. We have learned over the years that the effects of suppressing fire have slowly crept up on us. Today our job is to re-invite the role of fire and use it as a natural part of the ecosystem. Part of doing that is prepping and putting in control lines for prescribed burns.”

Harris lists the many benefits of prescribed burns: “They clean up the down and dead trees that have fallen over, and help thin out the trees

where there are too many stems per acre. Also, if we do have a wildland fire later on and it hits one of our prepped units, the previously burned ground will help knock that fire down and give us a healthier unit.” Burns can also open up the canopy and put nutrients back into the soil, improving the habitat for deer, elk, and other wildlife species.

Prescribed burning takes place all across the Black Hills National Forest, from Sundance, Wyoming down to Custer, South Dakota. Harris says that along with the crew’s morning PT, prescribed-burn prep work helps them prepare for the real deal: “This is a very arduous job, and we have to maintain ourselves. On a fire, we can have a 13- to 16-hour shift for 14 days in a row.”

The crew finishes up its work at the prescribed-burn prep area, and heads out to check on a two-day-old fire.

“This particular fire, called the Keough, started about five days ago with the lightning that came through,” says Tim Haas. “We first got dispatched to it two days ago. It was a holdover for a few days, and ended up being about 1¼ acres. It was controlled to the point where we could leave it, but we came back to do a check on it before calling it completely out.”

A check consists of gridding the area (walking and feeling the ground) and checking for smoke, heat, or anything out of the ordinary. “On this kind of fire, with the heavy fuel loading and heavy duff, it’s a good idea to give it at least two checks before you finally call it out.”

As captain of an engine crew, some of Haas’s responsibilities include running the engine, keeping it fire-ready, and keeping all the crew members trained up and in a fire-ready state. He also helps outline the day-to-day project work, like thinning or prescribed-burning preparation, and serves as a kind of career counselor: “I try to understand where each of the crew want to go with his or her career, make those opportunities happen for them, and get them any training they are looking for.”

One of Haas’s most important responsibilities is keeping morale up. “If you give them good feed-

back when they deserve it, and keep a positive attitude,” he said, “they will work hard for you and treat you right. “It’s a really good crew this year. We have just one first-year firefighter; the other guys have been around at least one season. These people really stay on top of things, and understand what needs to go on from day to day, how to be ready for a fire, and what’s expected of them once they arrive on scene. That’s our greatest success: seeing the crew work together.”

Brett Suiter, the team’s first-year firefighter, is enthusiastic about the work. “Every obstacle you have with this job, whether it’s cutting with no prior experience, or being on a fire for the first time, is a learning experience,” he says. “With everything we’ve done this summer, I’ve learned and grown from it. Every day really challenges me physically and mentally.”

For Suiter, this grueling work is a long-awaited opportunity. “I just love this work. It’s something I’ve wanted to do since high school — like a dream come true. I’ve got my winter job as an elementary school teacher, and then firefighting in the summer.”

When asked what he would rate as the best part about his first season of fighting fires, Suiter quickly answers: “This crew feels like a family. That will make it really hard to leave when the season is over, because from the very first day these guys made me feel like part of a family.”

Balancing family life and firefighting was an adjustment at first. “I don’t think anyone really wants their husband or wife to go out on a fire, because they know the risks that are involved. But

they just love and support you anyway,” Suiter comments.

He hopes to continue work as a firefighter; his passion for and commitment to the work will make it hard to step away from. “I’m not in this job for the money; I’m in it for the love of the outdoors, and the sense of helping to protect what we live, love, and play in. If you love being outside, working with great positive people, seeing new places, and learning new things, this is just an awesome job.”

For more information about the Black Hills National Forest, call (605) 673-9200 or visit our website at <http://www.fs.fed.us/r2/blackhills>.

Beth Steinhauer is the Public Affairs Specialist in the Black Hills National Forest in South Dakota.

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Left, Chip Harris, Northern Hills Engine Captain, points out the area where the crew will be doing prescribed burn prep work. Above, David Riley leads the crew on a line dig up a hill on the Limestone Rx unit. These lines create breaks in wildfires.