



Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest

Forest FEATURES

Guard School Transforms Students into Wildland Firefighters

Wildland firefighters have a tough job: they work 16 hours a day, enduring hot, smoky, dusty conditions with little sleep, digging line, hauling hose and setting backfires day after day for up to two weeks at a stretch. As summer starts, so does the beginning of fire season. Last June 10 students spent a week in Darrington, Wash., learning how to fight fires at Guard School. They finished on a

Sunday, and next week the Mt. Baker Initial Attack crew will be on their way to Alaska, Arizona or anywhere where there is a forest fire, or even a national disaster.

Most of the students, ranging in age 18 to 22, came from the area; some are from Seattle. Their supervisor, Gerald Williams, trains six to eight new crew members every year to form his 20-person hand crew. He is with the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest.

Williams starts in early spring recruiting at local area high schools and colleges. For the last six years, he searches for

candidates at Seattle schools, counselors, teachers, the International District, tribes and social organizations. Then he guides them through the application process.



Thomas Taylor, assistant supervisor of the Mt Baker Initial Attack Fire Crew, observes students digging their first fire line.

“Finding highly motivated recruits who can take orders, handle hard labor, who enjoy the outdoors, takes extra effort,” said Williams. He has been successful, filling six to eight new crew vacancies every year with additional recruits rounding out other fire and recreation crews on forest. Since many of Williams’ recruits are from the city and have little or no experience in the woods, the learning curve is intense. “We have to teach candidates not only about fire fighting but how to navigate through the woods,” he said.

Williams set the tone the first five minutes of school, introducing the rules,



Erin Lovely digs fire line.

regulations, and establishing his expectations. He said he is building a team, because when they deploy to fight a fire, they will be together 24 hours a day, seven days a week, eating, working and resting. “Under these conditions compatibility, camaraderie, understanding, communication and crew pride are an absolute necessity,” said Williams.

Guard School teaches fire behavior, suppression and safety through classroom and field exercises. Students spent 36 hours in the classroom, learning the fundamentals of fire behavior and suppression tactics. They learned how weather, terrain and fuels affect the nature of fire progression. Instructors intertwined classroom education with field demonstrations of the fire pack equipment and tools used.

At the end of the week, they proved what they learned in the classroom.

Donning heavy fire-retardant shirts and pants, heavy leather boots and gloves, safety glasses, hardhats, backpacks, belts with water, radios, and fire shelters and carrying hand tools they struck out into the forest, where instructors had tied pink flagging onto branches to mark where students would dig their first fire line.

A sawyer and swamper team cleared large brush, branches and cut trees out of the path with chainsaws. Students followed behind them chopping with axes and Pulaski’s on roots while crews followed scraping and digging away duff and debris.

The crew had to scrape at least an 18-inch line into mineral soil between the “fire” and the rest of the forest. Students learned to wield specialized equipment such as Pulaski’s and McLeod’s as well as familiar tools like axes, rakes and shovels. Williams reminded them that fire is not the only danger in the forest: the crew has to be aware of dangerous animals, unknown terrain and their own fatigue.

As the students made headway digging the line, they found a rhythm working together, became



The Mt. Baker Initial Attack Fire Crew survives their first field exercise of guard school.

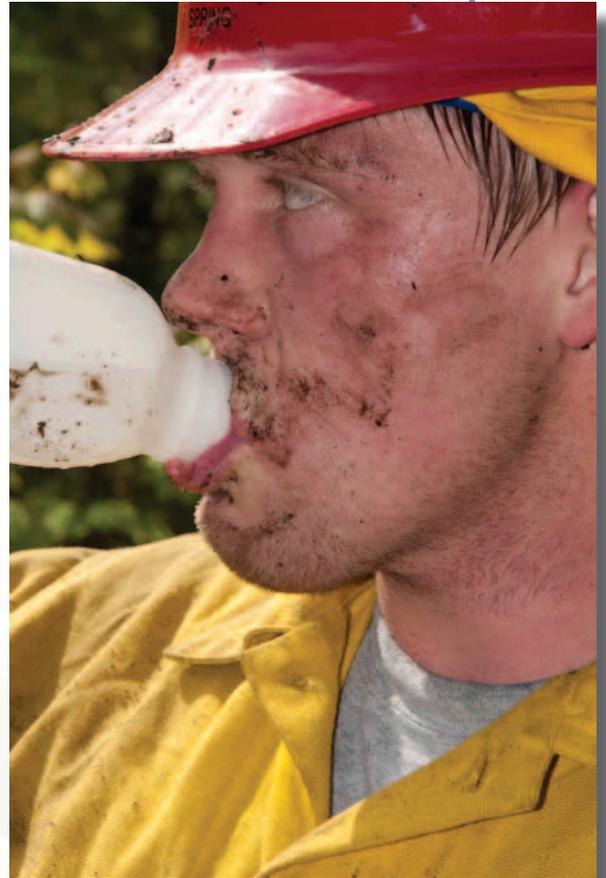
mindful of their spacing between each other, mirroring the neighboring crew member, all moving forward, step-in-step.

To pass the class, students had to demonstrate how to deploy a fire shelter, a fire-retardant material lined with aluminum. At the instructors shouted, students dropped their tools and backpacks, removed their water and pulled the shelter out of its tightly-packaged compact rectangle. They shook it out and climbed into the practice shelters, stretching out face-down onto the freshly dug earth, firmly sealing the edges to the ground with their bodies and making sure their water containers were in the bags with them. Instructors said that in ideal conditions, they will have 20 seconds to complete the task, but they will usually be in rocky terrain and high winds, rather than soft dirt on a calm day.

“There is so much you have to learn,” said Donovan Barnes, one of Williams’ recruits from Seattle. He wants to earn money for college. For Erin Lovely it is a step towards her dream of getting on at a city fire department. But like many of the students, they said they look forward to the physical and mental challenge of being a firefighter.

Williams said his hope is that they get a sense of accomplishment out of being firefighters and working as part of a team. “It helps that I hire the best of the best; highly motivated people,” said Williams. “It is a hard, but rewarding job.”

Firefighters must be US citizens, over 18, be physical fit, and have a GED or be a high school graduate. After graduation, crew members must be available to dispatch 24 hours a day, seven days a week during the fire season which typically starts in May and runs through October. For more information about the Mt. Baker Initial Response Crew contact Gerald Williams at 360-436-2337 or gwilliams@fs.fed.us.



Joe Spring takes a drink of water after digging fire line.

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June 2010*