

Preparing for this summer's wildfires

By Larry Hyslop



Fighting last year's Willow Creek Fire

The mood at the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) office is one of waiting for the wildfire season to begin. Elko County is in the midst of a drought. The cheatgrass is cured, ready to provide fire fuel. The other vegetation is quickly drying out. And this summer's lightning storms are already starting to move through Elko County.

Mike Ford is the Northeastern Nevada Interagency Fire Management Officer. He described the preparations made for the 2013 fire season. Much of his job is managing the crews and equipment of the BLM, U.S. Forest Service, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs. He coordinates with the Nevada Division of Forestry and their network of volunteers.

Crews stand ready at Elko, Carlin, Wells and Midas. Approximately 90 firefighters and 11 engines are in place. The "Rookie" school takes place this week, preparing new firefighters and those that will be on call.

The 20 members of the Ruby Mountain Hot Shots crew are ready for this season, but are a nationally assigned asset and may not be available for local wildfires. However, other Hot Shot crews can be called in for a local fire.

The first requirement is always finding the fire. A fire spotter airplane will take to the air when sensors show lightning strikes in an area of the county. In the case of a significant fire, that airplane will take over controlling the air space over the fire. If it proves to be a small fire, it will continue looking for other fires. A local helicopter can also be used to search for fires. Its crew can also be placed to fight fire and fill buckets of water for dousing fires. More airplanes and helicopters can be called in when the situation gets bad.

Mike depends on ranchers, miners, landowners, anyone out on the land, to report wildfires. Volunteer fire departments around the county are usually the first responders to a wildfire and some ranch crews are trained in fighting fires so they can get a fast start on a blaze.

The wildfire world for Mike is one of agreements and cooperation. The local BLM can be called upon to help with the Ely and Battle Mountain BLM Districts. He works with a local ranching liaison since local crews fight fires on private land also. Agreements are in place to help with fires in bordering areas such as southern Idaho and western Utah.

When conditions become bad, tankers can be stationed at retardant reloading sites in Wells and Battle Mountain. A heavy duty helicopter tanker might be based in Elko. More aircraft, tankers and trucks can be called in from spots around the west. Of course, such availability can depend on other fires around the west and proper funding is always a factor.

Since I live at the northwest edge of town, I am always concerned with fast moving, wind-swept fires such as last summer's Chimney fire off Sundance Drive. Mike said the trucks stationed in town can be headed out within ten minutes of a call. Response time can depend more on Elko traffic.

He said fires close to town involve other problems. People are too often drawn to these fires, making it hard for crews to work. Fire crews working from roads can be hindered by people driving past to see the fire. The safety for people near a fire becomes the responsibility of the Incident Commander, adding to his fire duties.

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