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IDL fire crews on the move

- By Summer Williams The Gazette Record
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When the fire season is slow in the St. Joe Supervisory area, it gives firefighters with the local Idaho Department of Lands (IDL) district the opportunity to travel to neighboring western states.

Local St. Joe Fire Warden Cory Flescher said this year alone crew members have traveled to states such as Texas, Alaska, Nevada, New Mexico and Colorado to name a few.

Flescher said the standard fire crew for the St. Joe IDL district is 10 people, which is enough to staff three engines.

“The amount of moisture we got this year put a damper on the fire season for the area,” Flescher said. “But that’s actually normal for our area. What was abnormal is how dry it was last year.”

Flescher said the district did not have as much of an opportunity to send out firefighters last year. This year, however, has provided the chance to do so.

“When they travel to different areas, they gain experience in dealing with different fuel types and terrain,” Flescher said.

He added when firefighters are working in other states their wages are paid for by the jurisdictions and federal government agency responsible for the wildfire protection.

“It’s a win-win,” Flescher said.

Across the state, Idaho Department of Lands and Timber Protective Associations (TPA) had sent more than 200 people off-district as of July 22 to help with fires in New Mexico, Colorado, Utah, Alaska, California, Washington, Arizona, Montana and Wyoming. Firefighters have also been sent to help the Forest Service and Nez Perce Tribe in Idaho.

“Deploying our firefighters does two things, our firefighters, especially new firefighters, have gained experience and training and are ready for our local fire season,” said State Forester Craig Foss. “It also shows our western partners our commitment to help when they are in need so that they reciprocate in our time of need.”

“Idaho is proud to help our neighbors fight fires across the west,” said Governor Brad Little. “Assisting on fires outside Idaho builds positive relationships, and it helps take some of the financial burden off Idaho taxpayers because other states and federal agencies pay for the salaries and the experience gained by our deployed firefighters early in the season.”

For many on the local St. Joe crew, the opportunity to travel to neighboring states is one of the reasons they enjoy what they do. Others find the work thrilling and challenging.

Kaden Hammond is in his fourth season with the IDL firefighting crew. He said “seeing new things” is what he enjoys.

“I like to travel and it appealed to me because you’re outside,” Michael Jones said, who is in his second season.

“Fighting fire is fun,” Justin Ledbetter said, who is also in his second season. “I love everything about it. It’s challenging.”

Clayton McQuade, in his fourth season with the district, said he enjoys the travel. Also in her fourth season, Alex Beauchman said she enjoys the camaraderie of the crew and getting to know different people.

“It’s everything,” Bubba Pugh said. “All aspects of the job. It’s my twelfth season.”

“The people I work with, and travel,” Pugh said of what he enjoys.

Cole Schiermeister has fought fire for 15 seasons. He said he loves the “sense of teamwork” among those he works with and the “camaraderie.”

“It’s the same as everyone has said,” Flescher said, who is in his fifth year as fire warden and eighteenth season. “IDL is a great place to work.”

For Reese Yerian and Kale Paslay the suggestion to work for an IDL fire crew during the summer was a suggestion of their high school principal. Both graduated from Timberlake High School. It is their first season.

“I’m enjoying it,” Yerian said, adding she may come back for another season.

“Traveling was fun, spraying the hose,” Paslay said.

Kelton Bournazian is also in his first year.

“I wanted to fight fire. Go somewhere new, somewhere pretty,” he said. “It’s exciting and I’ll probably stay with it.”