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Coeur d'Alene Press

Fueling the fire for career technical education

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Shelves of chain saws and pumps can be seen behind Idaho Department of Lands fire cache Coeur d'Alene manager Bjorn Jordan and Idaho Superintendent of Public Instruction Debbie Critchfield as Jordan leads a tour of the facility Thursday afternoon. **DEVIN WEEKS/Press**

By **DEVIN WEEKS**

Staff Writer | February 10, 2023 1:09 AM

Thousands of feet of fire hose are neatly coiled, boxes of equipment are impeccably stacked and every pump and chainsaw is in its proper place.

"Everything's so tidy," Idaho Superintendent of Public Instruction Debbie Critchfield said Thursday afternoon during a tour of the Idaho Department of Lands' Coeur d'Alene Interagency Fire Cache at 3284 W. Industrial Loop.

"Is it like this during your peak season?" she asked.

"It stays as organized as possible," fire cache manager Bjorn Jordan said. "Accountability is our foundation. We double-check everything that goes out the door."

At the fire cache, organization is integral to a smooth operation when fire season begins.

Also integral to the supply and demand of wildland firefighting are the men and women who literally keep the machines running — the mechanics, the welders, the engineers, the forklift operators — as well as the brave men and women who risk their lives on the fire lines to keep Idaho's forests safe.

Idaho is in need of those future heroes, in the field and behind the scenes.

Critchfield's visit to the fire cache zeroed in on the need to recruit skilled workers who can fill the roles that are so paramount to the health of Idaho's wildlands.

"We talk a lot about health care, we talk a lot about teaching, and then we look at, 'Do we have the firefighting needs?'" she said. "Not just the physical person, but literally the person who knows how to fix a small machine or a small engine, who knows how to make sure the saws are working.

"To see Bjorn have such an organized shop, so orderly, so clean, and he has to. He's not the guy out there on the hill fighting fire physically, but if it weren't for the work that he did, firefighters wouldn't have the tools they need."

The interagency fire cache provides supplies and equipment to support wildfire incidents throughout Idaho and other western states. Last season, the cache served crews fighting more than 200 wildfires. Equipment returned to the cache is repaired before sending it back out. Last fire season, Department of Lands employees refurbished 855 pieces of equipment and enough firehose to stretch 280 miles, the distance from Coeur d'Alene to McCall.

During the tour, Idaho Department of Labor staff members explained the challenges of recruiting skilled workers for building wildland fire engines,

maintaining small engines on pumps and chainsaws, operating equipment like forklifts and driving commercial vehicles.

“It has become more difficult to find people trained to do the type of work needed to help protect our forests and the people of Idaho,” Department of Lands Director Dustin Miller said. “I would love to see more young people gain interest in wildland fire fighting and other natural resource careers with Idaho Department of Lands.”

In 2021, a huge fire year, fire cache employees drove more than 250,000 miles, Jordan said.

“We’re a nice cache to have,” he said. “Our team does well handling all the needs and the long hours.”

In her role as state superintendent, Critchfield is an advocate for career technical education. She said the messaging around those types of careers, which are needed to run the fire cache, is important.

“These are the types of experiences that we’ve got to connect our students with, starting in sixth and seventh grades, because they’re interested,” she said. “If you were to bring a class of students here, they’d think this is cool.”

Colby Mattila, director of the Kootenai Technical Education Campus (KTEC), also participated in the fire cache tour. He said it was awesome to have Critchfield in North Idaho to highlight career technical education programs.

“She recognizes there’s a need and she’s trying to figure out a way to help everybody fill those needs and fill those positions,” he said.

He said the need for people in career technical professions is huge.

“You take any one of our programs and there’s at least three or four employers hurting for employees, trying to find skilled labor,” Mattila said. “Career technical, in my opinion, is the answer. Grow your own. Keep kids here in those high-paying jobs so they don’t have to leave.”

Opportunities aplenty await for those who are interested in any aspect of wildland firefighting.

"What we saw in 2021, an acute fire year for the state of Idaho, was there weren't enough skilled workers to do the job," said Scott Phillips, policy and communications chief for the Idaho Department of Lands. "We were at a point where we were desperate for help. Local media and the community really came together and got the word out. We found the people we needed to support the folks who were suppressing the fires in the field. We're being proactive though. We know that these resource shortages will continue and fire seasons are changing, becoming more severe as the West and Idaho become more dry."

Looking to the future, he said, an intersection exists between Idaho Department of Lands jobs, the skills those jobs require and Critchfield's proposals for career technical education.

"We're very excited about the prospect of giving career opportunities to young folks for the skills that we need and helping them grow in their careers and create opportunity for them," Phillips said.

The careers are exciting, and lucrative, he said.

"Once you've been involved in the rush and the excitement and the sense of service that comes from knowing the work you're doing to get that hose into the field, to make sure that pump or chainsaw that a man or woman in the fire land will be using, their life depends on it. Knowing you're helping be a part of that effort, it's fulfilling," Phillips said, adding that Idaho is a great employer.

"I would love to see more young people consider us for their career options," he said.