

National Elk Refuge News – August 21, 2009

Interagency Fire Preparedness Includes Refuge Tour



Fire crews refer to maps of the National Elk Refuge during a tour of the refuge road system.

Two engine crews from the Bridger-Teton National Forest and Grand Teton National Park toured the National Elk Refuge last week, developing a familiarity with the layout of the roads, the numbering system, and local place names used to identify various locations on the refuge. With only two staff members currently qualified in the wildland fire system, the National Elk Refuge depends on its interagency partners for initial response and suppression during a wildfire.

The crews were each given a map of the refuge to keep on board their engine. An additional copy of the map will be stored as a reference document in the Teton Interagency Dispatch Center, which manages fire communications for the Federal agencies. During the tour, which included approximately

20 miles of unpaved roads, crew members noted key information such as bridge weight restrictions, turnaround points, and availability of water for refilling the engines.

Chip Collins, Assistant Fire Management Officer for Grand Teton National Park, checked communications during the tour, testing the ability to hit radio repeaters at various locations on the refuge, especially in the draws. “Communication is one of our most important safety considerations,” Collins pointed out. “Assessing our ability to maintain radio contact is just as important as knowing the terrain and fuel types.”

Deputy Refuge Manager Tom Reed led a discussion on resource considerations such as sensitive areas and invasive species. “It’s a good idea to have those

already identified,” Reed explained, “since we may not have time to provide a resource advisor during the initial stages of a wildfire response.”

Chip Gerdin, Acting Assistant Fire Management Officer for the North Zone of the Bridger-Teton National Forest, agreed that the reconnaissance survey was helpful and would expedite response time and efficiency if the need arises. “I learned a lot of important information about the refuge in just the three hours we were on site,” Gerdin explained. “It was critical for the crews to see the areas where we may have to travel and pre-determine how to gain access.”

The current fire danger rating in the area remains at moderate.