

Tools of the Trade – A Look At Wildland Firefighting Tools

Fighting a wildfire safely means using the right tools for the job.

There are a variety of wildland firefighting hand-operated tools in use today.

Wherever water sources are available, heavy fire hoses with nozzles are hard to beat when it comes to suppressing wildfires, or most fires for that matter.

But away from roads, fire engines and water tenders, using water to fight wildfires becomes more challenging for firefighters on foot.

There are many portable water pumps today. Some float... others can be easily carried from place to place...even drafting from shallow and muddy water sources.

These two-stroke pumps are made for demanding use on the fireline. The heaviest pumps are usually taken apart when carried from place to place.

Fire hose comes in rolled sections of 50 and 100 feet, and in different sizes.

In places where a water source is minimal or far from the firelines, conserving water with smaller diameter fire hoses is best.

Away from roads, water pumps and hose supplies are delivered by helicopter, boats, even airplanes dropping paracargo.

And where fire hoses can't reach, collapsible bladder bags with hand-operated nozzles are a big help.

Whether using water or not, wildland firefighters carry an array of tools to saw...chop...dig...swat...and scrape vegetation away from the flames.

In many places, firefighters will construct a narrow path around the fire's perimeter, free of vegetation. This 'fireline' prevents flames from spreading on the ground, as crews work to encircle the fire.

Clearing trees and brush is often the first step. Chainsaws come in different styles and sizes. Firefighters usually pair up to work in saw-teams.

Shovels are used for digging and throwing dirt.

Because of their versatility, pulaskis are one of the most common fireline tools. They have an axe blade on one side for cutting...and a grubbing blade for chopping and scraping. The tool is named after its inventor - firefighter Ed Pulaski.

Many crews make a heavy version of the tool, known as a 'super-pulaski', It has a bigger tool head, and usually having a flexible fiberglass handle rather than a wooden one.

McLeod Tools have a long flat blade for chopping and scraping dry grass and brush.

‘Combie’ or combination tools can be used as a scraping tool, or a shovel.

In hard ground, the spike end of the ‘pig tool’ is ideal for prying roots and rocks from the fireline.

A small rake or ‘monkey-paw’ is helpful when ‘cleaning up’ the fireline of any excess debris that might otherwise allow flames to creep across.

In some places, leaf blowers are used to create temporary firelines, blowing debris away from a fire’s path.

In light grasses and tundra, swatting flames is sometimes the best way to attack a fire. Many swatting tools have been developed.

They are called swatters...beaters...and flappers.

The tops of small spruce trees can also be used to swat flames.

Fighting wildfires is physically demanding and dangerous work.

No matter where a wildfire strikes, firefighters have many different hand tools available to help them get the job done right.

This is Christina Haydon with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.