

Press Release

Lateral West Fire

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Fledgling Firefighters Fly – story and photos by Catherine J. Hibbard



In March they were in the classroom learning about wildland fire for the first time. Twenty weeks later they were helping fight a 6,000-acre wildfire. Such was the experience for several AmeriCorps members stationed at Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service sponsored basic wildland firefighter training for 40 volunteers enrolled in the Perry Point, Maryland campus of the AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps.

Ben Riley, from Chicago, was one of the trainees. “I heard wildland fire was one of the options at AmeriCorps,” said Riley, 24. “I didn’t know anything about it, but I was drawn to the idea. I like working seasonally, travelling

and the outdoors” After completing his training and passing a fitness test where he had to walk three miles carrying a 45-pound pack in under 45 minutes, Riley was assigned to the third AmeriCorps wildland fire team hosted at Great Dismal Swamp this year.

That team, appropriately named “Phoenix 3” helped snuff out a small wildfire in North Carolina. Then the Lateral West Fire started and Phoenix 3 was among the first responders. They worked with firefighter Jordan Black from nearby Mackay Island National Wildlife Refuge. Black, an alumnus of the AmeriCorps program, was amazed by the team’s enthusiasm. “We were in the thickest smoke I’ve ever been in my life and they thought it was the coolest thing in the world. “We’re in the middle of the fire!” they said.”

“AmeriCorps is a great opportunity to expose young adults to wildland fire and the role fire plays to restore ecosystems,” said Steve Hubner, who oversees the refuge’s



AmeriCorps program at the refuge. Hubner, a Forester in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s Northeast Regional Fire Program, likes the real world experience of Phoenix 3 at the Lateral West Fire. “They’re not treated with kid gloves. They are firefighters just like anybody else out there.”

Hubner’s hope is that some Phoenix 3 members will, like Jordan Black, decide to make firefighting a career and come back to work for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.



In the meantime, he's enjoying seeing the young people he instructed in the classroom put their skills to work. "It's nice to see the complete cycle," he said.

AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps is a 10-month, team-based residential program for people age 18-24. The mission is to strengthen communities and develop leaders through direct, team-based national and community service. ###

Photo captions from top to bottom. All credit: Catherine J. Hibbard/USFWS

The Phoenix 3 Team cools down a stump at the Lateral West Fire.

Veteran firefighter Brett Gore of Wallkill River National Wildlife refuge enjoys mentoring young firefighters like AmeriCorps member Chelsea Hurst.

The Phoenix 3 Team rolls fire hose

AmeriCorps members prepare an engine for a day on the Lateral West Fire. Clockwise from bottom left: Ben Riley, Kiera Westfall, Colin May, and Tristan Fowler

