

Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge
2700 Suwannee Canal Road
Folkston, GA 31537
Phone: (912) 496-7836
Fax: (912) 496-7991
<http://www.fws.gov/okefenokee>

News Release



For Immediate Release

Contact: Susan Heisey, 912-496-7366 ext 233

Date: November 6, 2013

Okefenokee Firefighters Return the Favor

Folkston, GA... When Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge had its extensive fires in 2007 and 2011-2012, hundreds of firefighters from nearly every state came to our assistance. This past summer, Okefenokee's fire staff lent a hand at fires burning out West – in Idaho, Oregon, California, and Washington state.

Okefenokee NWR's Robert Alonso, Forestry Technician/Firefighter, loves what he does, and sees himself becoming Fire Management Officer someday. "I could have finished my physical therapy license," he says of his change of career plans. "But I chose to do this. My sons (ages 3 and 11) and my family are proud of what I do. I like the challenge, helping others, being outdoors, and knowing you are a part of protecting homes and natural resources." Most recently, he and Forestry Technician Andy Heisey worked as sawyers with a Type 2 Initial Attack crew in Pomeroy, Washington. "We were on a hand crew," he said. "We put a fire line in steep terrain where you can't bring in bulldozers and heavy equipment." They wielded chainsaws to cut the line, and Alonso also acted as an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT), which is also a service he provides at the refuge.

They also worked in Oregon on fires in Malheur National Forest and Deschutes National Forest on their 14-day detail. "We put two of those fires to bed, doing mop-up, which is basically making hot stuff cool," Alonso related. "We cover ashes with dirt, or soak them with water from bladder bags, to keep a fire from starting up again." Alonso and Engineering Equipment Operator Fed Privett also worked on a helicopter detail in Idaho's Payette National Forest this summer, taking the place of another firefighter Cory Bryant who did two weeks on that job. Privett worked as a fuel truck driver, and Alonso rode the helicopter and was dropped off with a crew to check on active fires. As an EMT, he was called out on a rescue of an injured firefighter.

Many of Okefenokee's folks have been out on fires several times this year. Okefenokee's dispatcher, Brantley Boatright, recently did a 30-day stint as dispatcher in Maine for the U.S. Forest Service. Working at the Northeast Interagency Coordination Center he sent out around a hundred people in multiple crews for mostly prescribed fires as well as fire-suppression. He also acted as dispatcher at the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge in April during their wildfires.

While helicopters can ferry buckets of water to small hot spots, they are most often used to transport firefighters into remote locations and to carry cargo. They are also good tools for prescribed burns, as they can cover large areas with flammable pellets called "ping pong balls" fired from a dispenser. Prescribed fires are those set intentionally for the purpose of improving wildlife habitat and/or reducing flammable vegetation which, if it continues to build, can cause a larger and more destructive wildfire down the road.

When it comes to educating the public about wildfires and the need for prescribed fires, Fire Management Specialist Terri Jenkins takes the message to both homeowners and local governments all over the country. She has a quarter century of experience working "on the line", mostly with prescribed burns, and sometimes finds it challenging to explain why purposely setting fires is important.

"People object to the smoke," she said. "But in a fire-adapted ecosystem, fire is meant to occur. The endangered red-cockaded woodpecker, the gopher tortoise, the eastern diamondback rattlesnake, and the indigo snake in Okefenokee all depend on fire to maintain the habitat they need to live. That habitat is the open understory that the longleaf pine forest provides when it burns during natural cycles, and longleaf withstands fire much better than other pines."

Without regular fire cycles, which are almost always caused by lightning, the longleaf pine and its wiregrass-saw palmetto understory would become a hardwood forest. The swamp itself would eventually fill up with peat (partially decayed vegetation) and the wetland would become a forest.

Recently Jenkins worked with the U.S. Forest Service's Great Basin Prevention and Education Team in Idaho to help homeowners use practices to help their homes survive fires, including at Beaver Creek Fire in Ketchum. Her team taught Firewise and "home hardening" concepts, such as using less flammable vegetation around houses, and creating "defensible space" so that there is a firebreak that will keep fire from the structures. They also work with local governments to try to create firebreaks around entire communities. "We're trying to get people to understand that money spent on pre-suppression activities is less expensive than money spent fighting fires that could have been avoided," said Jenkins. She pointed to Georgia's towns of St. George, Argyle, Fargo, and Woodbine as communities awarded the "Firewise" designation.

As more people build homes in fire-adapted habitats, coupled with climate change that causes more droughts and changes in precipitation patterns, the potential for further disasters like the ones experienced out West the last few years increases. While the natural habitat might benefit from these fires, the "wildland-urban interface" requires resources and lives put on the line to protect human habitation. But convincing people that they may need to cut trees in their yards, change landscaping, and conduct common sense preventative measures rubs some people the wrong way. Such is the challenge facing Jenkins and her colleagues.

The "Ready, Set, Go" program she helps promote is similar to those in areas prone to other natural disasters, such as hurricanes. It encourages families to make home survival kits and have an evacuation plan in place, including pet care arrangements.

Budget cutbacks in recent years, including the federal budget sequester enacted in March 2013, have reduced the number of prescribed fires, as well as wildland firefighters. That could be more destructive and costly in the long run, Jenkins said.

"There's a lot of attention paid to Okefenokee fires," she continued. "There are a lot of high-value trees in these timber plantations outside the refuge. And our fires tend to last a long time." During the year-long Honey Prairie Fire, fire crews came from nearly every state, and during the peak there were close to a thousand firefighters at one time, with 225 bulldozers and close to 250 engines.

The hardest thing for most firefighters is leaving their families for extended periods of time. Reggie Forcine says he doesn't like being away from his wife of 15 years and his 11-year-old son while on fires, but he does like traveling, meeting new people, and knowing he's helped save lives and property.

The deaths of 19 hotshot firefighters early in the fire season gives him pause. "It stays on your mind," he says of the disaster. "You tend to get a little complacent over time. But after something like that, you watch your P's and Q's." For firefighters, who put their lives on the line, work long hours away from home, and often sleep in the dirt, the situation is hard for many to understand. Yet they obey the call to duty, trained to protect public and private property and conserve and protect our natural resources for the benefit of future generations of Americans.

To learn how to be Firewise, go to www.firewise.org.

To learn about the Ready, Set, Go! Program, go to www.wildlandfirersg.org

Photo Captions:

1. Robert Alonso and Andy Heisey at Malheur National Forest, near John Day, Oregon
2. The U. S. Fish & Wildlife helicopter and firefighters during the North Fork and Little Queens Fires, Sawtooth National Forest near Atlanta, Idaho. L to R – Reggie Forcine (Okefenokee NWR), Cory Bryant (Okefenokee NWR), Ryan Roche (Lake Wales Ridge NWR, Florida), Paul Ryan, (J.N. "Ding" Darling NWR, Florida)
3. Robert Alonso stands in fiery embers to cut a burning tree so the fire doesn't reach the crown and spread farther.