

## Alaskan firefighters fight fires in lower 48

by Doug Newbould

Now that the 2000 wildfire season is over and most Refuge firefighters have returned to Alaska, I thought it would be interesting to share some of our experiences. Like most firefighters in Alaska and throughout the United States, we had many opportunities to travel around the Rockies and the Great Basin this summer—chasing wildfire. I think I can safely speak for my co-workers, when I say that this fire season will long be remembered for its duration, its coverage and its intensity.

It started back in early June, when the first three Refuge firefighters headed for New Mexico. Dave Reese went to the Viveash Fire near Pecos as a helicopter crewmember. After a day in New Mexico, Dianne MacLean was ordered as a helicopter manager to the Outlet Fire on the north rim of the Grand Canyon in Arizona. Alicia Duzinski went with a helicopter module (team) to the now infamous Cerro Grande Fire at Los Alamos, New Mexico. After that incident, many in the fire management community felt the Los Alamos fire would have a profound and long-lasting effect on us all. Little did we know that it would be shoved to the backs of our minds, as the most devastating wildfire season in decades took off like a rocket.

In July and August, fires began popping up in the central and northern Rockies and the Great Basin. Refuge firefighters Anthony Snow, Mike Woods, Brandon Miner, Candy Godin and Jon Papendieck were dispatched to fires in Nevada, Colorado, Wyoming, Idaho and Montana. Anthony was ordered as a helicopter crewmember and Mike went out as a medical unit leader trainee. Brandon, Candy and Jon joined firefighters from the Chugach National Forest on a 20-person hand crew. I was sent to the Helena National Forest as a felling boss (a crew boss for tree feller/sawyers). Larry Adams (our recently retired Refuge fire management officer) returned to active duty in Idaho as a dispatch recorder and resource unit leader. Dianne, Alicia and Dave returned south for their second firefighting tour of the season.

After short trips home to rest and recuperate, all of us returned to Idaho and Montana in late August and early September. Anthony is still in Montana, helping folks on the Lewis and Clark National Forest com-

plete fire rehabilitation projects. All totaled, eleven Kenai National Wildlife Refuge employees logged over 4400 hours fighting fire in the Lower 48 this year. We worked on more than two dozen wildfires in six states. All worked hard long shifts for two weeks at a time in hot weather, slept on the ground and came home with great performance evaluations. I am proud of them. Despite the hardships, I know all of us gained valuable experience. And we will be better prepared for wildland and prescribed fire incidents in Alaska because of it.

One of the reasons why the 2000 fire season was so unusual is because there was no let-up, no green-up and no intermission. From May to October, the battle was constant. Usually, there are two distinct fire seasons in the West: the early season (between Break-Up and Green-up when forest fuels and the weather are dry), and the late season (from August to October when grasses cure and the days are long and hot). We never got a break. In my 25 years of firefighting, I have never seen such extreme fire weather coupled with drought-stricken forests. It was a recipe for disaster, and we watched it bake.

I was at the Yellowstone fire in 1988. This was worse...much worse. In August there were so many large fires burning in Idaho and Montana, there were not enough overhead teams and firefighters available to attack every fire. Some fires burned for days before anyone could get to them. The national wildfire organization was stretched so thin, that the Army, the Marines, the National Guard and firefighters from Canada, Australia and New Zealand were called in. I actually worked for a division supervisor from Tasmania. I enjoyed working with him and it was a great experience, but it concerns me that we are unable to handle our own wildfire incidents in America. To my knowledge, this has never happened before. We wrote the book on wildland firefighting. The rest of the world looks to us for fire management expertise.

It makes me wonder how we will manage wildfires in the years ahead. Ten years from now, will we look back at Yellowstone 1988 and say it was merely the harbinger, the messenger of things to come? Forests throughout the West have become unmanaged tinder-

boxes, choked with brush and doghair stands of suppressed conifers. It is entirely possible that we have not yet seen the worst fire season—the potential remains. Nationally, we will have much to discuss in the months ahead. How can we prevent another Cerro Grande? What can we do to limit the potential of wildland fires in America? How can we supplement the

national fire organization during extreme fire seasons? It's going to be an interesting winter..

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