

# Preparedness is the key to effective fire management

by Doug Newbould

“Be Prepared.” I remember learning that motto as a young boy, during my short stint as a Cub Scout in the hill country of southern Illinois. And though the phrase seems indelibly etched upon my brain, the reasons behind the memorization of that motto are now lost somewhere amid the clutter in the attic (my brain). Although that period of time in my life is rather foggy, I don’t think I knew then what “being prepared” really meant. I’m somewhat skeptical anyone under the age of twenty-something could have enough life experience to truly understand the physical, mental and perhaps spiritual implications of preparedness.

In defense of Scouting, I only had a couple of years of training as a Cub Scout, so there wasn’t sufficient time for me to practice what I was taught and learn the mission of the motto. What I know now is Scouting builds character in young people. It’s all about developing integrity and positive attitudes. And I think “Be Prepared” is about attitude—an attitude of readiness. It’s the readiness to help others: a neighbor, a community, a nation. I think Scouts often make the best public servants, because they are prepared to give of themselves to make a difference in the world.

Although I didn’t rise to the rank of Eagle Scout, or Arrow or even Webelo, I did pursue a career as a public servant. And now as a fire management officer, being prepared takes on a whole new meaning for me. In fact, Preparedness is one of the primary goals and major functions of my job. Preparedness in wildland fire management is both broad in scope and focused in its purposes. Without it, the fire management program at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge could not function.

Fire management preparedness on the Refuge includes: development of preparedness plans and seasonal risk analyses, recruiting and hiring qualified firefighters and other fire management staff, training fire

personnel and maintaining qualifications, managing the firefighter physical fitness program, purchasing and maintaining firefighting equipment and supplies, daily monitoring forest fuels and weather conditions throughout the fire season, developing daily staffing and work plans based on fire danger, and last but certainly not least—wildland fire mitigation and prevention.

There are national preparedness plans and staffing levels, there are preparedness plans and staffing levels for Alaska, and there is a Refuge Preparedness Plan that defines the staffing levels for a given set of weather and fuel conditions or fire danger rating. These plans are in place to ensure organizational preparedness throughout the country. Preparedness is also a personal responsibility for every Refuge and other wildland firefighter.

Personal preparedness means keeping in shape (a real challenge for Alaskan firefighters in the winter), attending fire management training courses and maintaining Incident Command System qualifications, maintaining personal fire gear and personal protective equipment, and maintaining a state of fire readiness for response to fire emergencies (24-7) during the fire season.

I believe that preparedness is the key to safe and effective firefighting and the foundation for an efficient and productive fire management organization or program. So if you know any Scouts who are looking for work, tell them to give me a call. I’m always looking for people who know how to “Be Prepared.”

*Doug Newbould is the Fire Management Officer at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. For more information about the Refuge, visit the headquarters in Soldotna, call (907) 262-7021. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://kenai.fws.gov>.*