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In 2016, regional and national BIA fire leaders identified several challenges facing Indian Country's wildland fire management program. Of key concern is Indian' Country's commitment to build sustainable fire management leadership.

The BIA began working on several strategies to address this concern. These include converting qualified Administratively Determined (AD) employees to seasonal employees and funding student intern positions. It is also working with human resource officers to build career ladder and entry level GS/Tribal positions.

To convert the AD workforce, the BIA announced in May, 2016 that it was investing $3.2 million over two years to fund three Type 2 Initial Attack (T2IA) "training hand crews." The 20-person hand crews will be used to respond to wildfires and perform fuels, emergency stabilization, burned area rehabilitation and forestry activities. Through this work, firefighters are professionally trained and mentored.

Prior to receiving funding and sponsorship for the training crews, units had to submit proposals to the BIA demonstrating how their fire management program planned to develop employees locally, regionally and nationally. The proposals were required to include Long Term Sustainability Plans to document how firefighters would receive administrative support, housing, training, and career development opportunities.

Of the 22 proposals submitted, the Branch selected the top three. These were from the Bay Mills Indian Community, which would host the Bay Mills T2IA Crew; the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT), which would host the Mission Valley T2IA Crew; and the Yakama Nation, which would host the Signal Peak T2IA Crew.

As fire managers begin to weave workforce strategies together, they are pleased with the initial results of the 2017 fire season.



Mission Valley and BIA Oklahoma hand crews pose for a picture at the end of shift while working jointly on the Blue Bay Fire (2017), Polson MT. Credit: CSKT.

From AD to Employee

Of the 90 full and part time positions created for the training crews, experienced AD firefighters filled nearly a third of them.

While ADs are called when needed, seasonal employees accrue health and retirement benefits and are paid for six months of work, regardless of whether they are supporting emergency response or fuels projects. These benefits accrue with time and help retain firefighters the unit has already invested in. Seasonal employees are also able to attend training courses typically out of reach to AD firefighters.

In the long run, this conversion provides a reliable and sustainable workforce for Indian Country that is better trained and experienced. It is the expectation that these dedicated employees infuse Indian Country's fire management programs to become the next fire management leaders.



Signal Peak T2IA Hand Crew hikes out at the end of shift on the Dry Creek Fire, 2017. Photo provided by Aleck Farrell, Crew Boss, Yakama Nation.

Workforce Development

In 2017, more than 10 million acres burned across the nation, exhausting all fire response resources. Seasons such as these afford crew members ample time and opportunities to work on qualifications not usually attained through suppression work alone.

On the Bay Mills crew, firefighters also worked on firing boss (FIRB), prescribed fire burn boss (RXB3), and fire effects monitor (FEMO) qualifications. In total, crewmembers completed 40 task books. These ranged from division group supervisors (DIVS), crew bosses (CRWB), to sawyers just learning how to use a chainsaw (FAL3). In addition, 38 new task books were opened.

The Crew’s willingness to provide firefighters with opportunities to diversify their qualifications is a strength of the training crews and is a mark all training should strive for. Over time, their wide range of skills will make firefighters more versatile when competing for higher leadership positions.

Student Intern Achievements

The BIA Student Internship Program provides students earning college degrees in natural resources, forestry or fire management with on-the-job training and quality experiences. Upon graduation, they are qualified and prepared for federal or Tribal service. As federal employees, student interns are paid full salaries according to their GS grade, and earn service time that counts toward fire retirement. When complete, the intern position is converted to a full time permanent position and placed with either a Tribe or a BIA agency, which gains an experienced firefighter who understands the fundamental rules and responsibilities of employment.

To complete the Program, interns must accrue 640 hours of field experience. For fire interns, their end-goal is to certify as an advanced firefighter (FFT1). This is a foundational qualification firefighters need to move into career leadership positions and typically takes three to four summers to complete.

Because the training crews and the Student Internship Program share similar missions, there are two positions per training crew reserved for interns. This summer, the BIA hosted 15 interns with one placed on each crew.



Firefighter from Bay Mills Hand Crew uses a leaf blower to remove leaf litter from the fireline. 2017. Photo by Cole Tadgerson, Assistant Crew Boss, BIA Michigan Agency.

About the Bay Mills Crews

The Bay Mills Crew is hosted by the Bay Mills Indian Community, located just south of the Canadian border in Michigan. With a Tribal membership of just over 2,000 people, Bay Mills and Sault Saint Marie Tribes partnered to fill crew positions. To expand training opportunities, detailers from Minnesota Agency (MN), Great Lakes Agency (WI), the Menominee Tribe of Wisconsin, Crow Agency (MT), and Okmulgee Field Office (OK) filled in throughout the year. Two additional firefighters from the Hiawatha National Forest in Michigan also detailed with the crew.

Starting in April, the crew took assignments in eastern Oklahoma, Minnesota, Utah, San Carlos, AZ, Montana and North Carolina, finishing their season in late September. On a few occasions, the crew worked alongside the Montana-based Chief Mountain Interagency Hotshot Crew (IHC). The exchange fostered additional mentoring experiences and opened doors for firefighters to detail onto the IHC next year. The long season even allowed for an individual from the crew to work with the Type 1 Great Lakes Wildland Fire Module to further his fire monitoring task book.

In all, the crew finished 12 full assignments exposing firefighters to well over 195 days of fire and fuels management experience. During this time, crew members completed 23 task books and started 21 new ones.

Perhaps the most impactful success was that two crew members accepted permanent positions, one with the BIA and the other with the State of Michigan. This turnover creates space for new firefighters entering the program and encourages other crewmembers to advance their careers.

Bay Mills Training Facility

The Bay Mills fire building in Brimley, Michigan is an asset that provides a unique training center for the fire management program. It is equipped with a sizeable classroom large enough for 100 students, a full industrial kitchen and four dorm-style rooms that house 10 people each. In 2017, 10 classes were held ranging from basic fire school to Firing Operations (S-219).

This year, managers will add a day to the training schedule to teach firefighters about college classes needed to move into the wildland fire professional series (401) and how to apply to positions through USAJobs.

Mission Valley Crew

Mission Valley Crew, named for the Mission mountain range that borders the east side of the Flathead Indian Reservation, is hosted by the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT).

This initial attack crew has the leadership and qualifications to break into three separate squads. Considered one of the crew's most valuable strengths, this capability helped diversify and strengthen the CSKT's overall fire management program.

Their fire season started in late May. The crew supported wildfires in Utah and Montana before returning home in July to work on the Blue Bay and Midway Fires which burned more than 1,100 acres of the Flathead Indian Reservation. They also supported the Liberty Fire, which started on the Flathead Indian Reservation and moved across the Montana Department of Natural Resource Conservation and Lolo National Forest lands. In total, over 30,000 acres were burned. These lightning-caused fires kept the crew busy through September when the snow finally put them out.

While the crew stayed close to home during the summer, they clocked over 100 days performing suppression and repair activities on both large fires. Consequently, the Crew Boss, Chris McCrea, qualified as a Strike Team and a Task Force Leader, while Richard Van Swearingen, Lead Squad Leader, certified as a Crew Boss. Meanwhile, Kyle Blackman, a Student Intern and Sam Peel, firefighter, were able to complete FFT1 and ICT5 task books, allowing them to compete for a squad boss position this year.

Salish Kootenai College (SKC)

SKC, managed by the CSKT, is currently the only Tribal college in the nation that provides Bachelor of Science degrees emphasizing Forestry or Wildland Fire Management. Consequently, the

BIA Student Internship Program partners with SKC to provide higher learning opportunities for students interested in pursuing degrees in natural resources, forestry or wildland fire management.

While Student Interns do not have to attend SKC to participate in the Internship Program, students get the advantage of living in college dorm rooms while working on one of the many progressive fire crews managed by the CSKT.

Signal Peak Crew

At the base of the 5,100-foot Signal Peak shield volcano in Washington resides the Yakama Nation. It is here the Signal Peak Initial Attack Crew proudly calls home.

The Signal Peak crew name first appeared in the early 1900s when the Indian Division of the Citizen Conservation Corps (ID-CCC) established a work center and fire lookout tower on Signal Peak to protect Yakama Nation's 600,000- acre forest from wildfire. The crew took the volcano's name as their call sign. This year, the crew added a new motto, adopted from the movie, "Heartbreak Ridge" "*Vestibulum. Accommodare, Superare.*" It means "Improvise, Adapt. Overcome."

Yakama Nation started hiring in March. Eleven firefighters from the AD pool were converted to seasonal positions, and several other firefighters from the engine program took crewmember positions. By June, the fully formed crew was on its first assignment.

Throughout the six-month season, the Signal Peak crew traveled to Oregon and Washington several times. By October, the crew had over 100 days of fireline experience from 15 fire assignments. During these assignments, one new firefighter was certified as a FFT1 and ICT5 and another is close to completing a Crew Boss certification.

Out of the 11 ADs convert to new employees, two successfully moved up to fill permanent positions in the Yakama Nation Fire Program. James Delarosa moved into Yakama Nation's Engine Program, while Marcus Enick is now a Lead Firefighter for the crew.

Hiring

While competition for any of the crew positions is steep, all native and non-native qualified firefighters may apply through each of the Tribal human resource departments. Job announcements are posted online via each of the Tribal web sites with hiring typically beginning in the spring.

Like all firefighters, applicants must hold a valid driver's license, pass a background security check, pass a medical examination and drug test and be able to carry 45 pounds for three miles in 45 minutes or less.

Future Outlook

Unlike Interagency Hotshot Crews, BIA measures the success of these T2IA training crews by their training records. If employees are moving into permanent fire management positions, and building qualifications that are adding meaningful experience, then these crews are helping to develop Indian Country's future leaders.

Given the high level of achievement these firefighters reached in their first year, it is a priority for the Branch to continue funding the crews to ensure our workforce keeps developing and growing. The BIA looks forward to seeing what they will achieve in 2018.

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