Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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When one hears “interagency”, do they think many agencies, one mission? The Bureau of Indian Affairs Mescalero Apache Helitack Crew is just such a crew. Consisting of members from Bureau of Indian Affairs Southwest Regional Office, Navajo Regional Office, U.S. Forest Service, Lincoln National Forest/Smokey Bear District, and Cibola National Forest, this is what interagency looks like in practice.

All Mescalero Apache helitack crew members have previous wildland fire experience working on Interagency Hotshots Crews, Type 2 Initial Attack handcrews and Engine Crews. When asked why they transitioned to a helitack position, they all had the same answer- ‘we want to work on a good team, and this is it.

The Mescalero Helitack Crew is under the BIA Southwest Regional Office, duty stationed at the Mescalero Agency in Mescalero New Mexico. Under the Interagency structure, the Alamogordo Dispatch Center assigns them to local wildfires burning on Bureau of Indian Affairs/Tribal lands, U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service, State of New Mexico and Texas fires.



Golden Moore, Helicopter Crewmember, Navajo Region

When the southwest season slows down, the crew moves north to help Indian Country with managing their fires. In total, this crew is busy about eight months of the year. According to Kevin Pellman, Mescalero Helicopter Crew Supervisor, helitack personnel usually get first eyes on a fire. As such, firefighters must understand what they are looking at to provide the right information to dispatch so firefighters can respond appropriately. Besides providing initial response, Pellman says helitack crewmembers are firefighters; they just have the additional mission and training to use helicopters to safely transport firefighters and tools to fires.

They may be the first on scene to start putting the fire out, or they may establish a helibase to support other front line firefighters. Like all BIA/Tribal helitack crews, the qualifications these firefighters have are more than just your average firefighter. They are BIA's mid-level leaders, working towards building their higher fire management qualifications. Helicopter managers are qualified to manage large helibases under the management of a Type 1 Incident. At the same time, crewmembers are qualified to break into three smaller squads to put out three individual fires at once if need be. This versatility makes the crew a valuable resource for Indian Country and the interagency community it supports.

The Mescalero Helitack Crew is currently assigned to the Coyote Fire on the Guadalupe Mountain National Park near Carlsbad, New Mexico. John Montoya, Fire Management Officer for the Park says the Crew is a critical resource to the Park because of its ability to quickly access and respond to wildfires in the rugged environment and steep canyons of the Park.

My predecessors, says Montoya, "saw the Crew's value nearly 20 years ago. It was they who asked the National Park Service to secure funding so the Crew could provide support when needed." This interagency cooperation continues today.

In addition, the Guadalupe Mountains are part of the Mescalero Apache traditional grounds. Montoya, himself an enrolled member of the Mescalero Apache Tribe and a former member of Mescalero Helitack Crew, understands that knowing the land from the air and ground gives an edge over other firefighters. The Mescalero Apache know and respect the land in a way other firefighters cannot. It's part of their livelihood.

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