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There When You Need Them

Oklahoma wildland firefighters lend a helping hand during busy fire season.

JEFF HARRISON



As a teenager, Cliff Eppler did not know what he wanted to do with his life. And he certainly didn't expect to find the answer in a smoldering pasture near Sallisaw, Okla.

Eppler was driving his pickup truck down a country road when he spotted a local forest ranger battling a grassfire in a nearby field. The teenager pulled over to the side of the road and helped the man stamp out the blaze. Shortly after the fire came to a rest, he had his answer.

"I was just 16 years old, but I knew right then that I wanted to become a ranger," Eppler says. "I enjoyed helping him put out that fire then and I still enjoy doing it."

Today, Eppler is one of the Oklahoma Forestry Service's nearly 80 rangers dedicated to prevention and suppression of wildfires in the eastern portion of the state. And that task wasn't an easy one this past summer as scorching heat and drought like conditions turned much of the state's forests into kindling.

"This has been a challenging year because we have had very dry fuel and extremely hot weather," says Mark Goeller, Oklahoma Forestry Service assistant director for wildland fire and eastern operations.

“And if someone outside of the area needs assistance and we have the personnel available, we’ll send it. We’ll go anywhere.”

The Oklahoma Forestry Service staffs 42 units across the eastern portion of the state. Each unit consists of a ranger and crew chief, which operate a dozer and brush bumper. The crews are on call 24 hours a day providing fire protection and prevention in their assigned district.

Don Cook, a forest ranger crew chief in Broken Bow, says he never dreamed of a career in the forest service, but was attracted to the challenges and variety of the job.

“To do this job you have to enjoy fighting fires and be pretty flexible,” the 19-year veteran says. “There’s a lot of variety, you never know where or what you’re going to be doing each day. I could be in Eagletown or Poteau or Woodward or who knows where. And there are also days when it’s 110 degrees outside and I’m walking behind a dozer with a drip torch, wondering if I’ve lost my mind.”

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Those calls requesting assistance are not limited to the 18-county region. This year, crews have been dispatched across the state and have helped with large wildfires near the Arbuckle Mountains and spent nearly a week battling a blaze in Medicine Park in late June.

“We’ve gone all the way from Broken Bow and Jay all the way to Erick and up to the panhandle,” Goeller says.

Through an agreement with the federal government, the Oklahoma Forestry Service also makes its wildland fire division available to other states. Eppler has helped on a number of those fires, including the massive wildfire that scorched nearly 800,000 acres of Yellowstone National Park in 1988. As part of a crew of 20 Oklahoma fire personnel, Eppler spent nearly two weeks helping combat the historic fire.

“That was a really memorable and unique experience,” says Eppler. “When we got there, we had to hike 10 miles to get to the spike camp. And I remember every morning a wildlife official would ride horseback out of camp to check for grizzly bears. They’d go out before crews and look for grizzly bears. And every tent would have bear spray, so that was pretty different.”

Wildland firefighters have been protecting the state’s forests since the Oklahoma Forestry Service was founded in 1925. Before that time, excessive timber harvesting without forest regeneration and uncontrolled wildfires discouraged any interest in making investments or improvements in much of the southeastern portion of the state.

During the early days of the department, rangers relied on a number of fire lookout towers to monitor the heavily wooded part of the state. At one time, there were 23 state fire towers within the protection area. A few of those fire towers are still in use today, but the department now relies on flyovers.

“We would have people climb those towers to check for smoke and sometimes they would stay up there all day, depending on the fire danger,” Goeller says. “As we’ve moved on through history we now have a three pronged attack with our employees patrolling their districts, public calling in and surveillance with our aircraft and fire towers.”

The equipment on the ground has also come a long way during the past few decades.

“In 1982 we got our first dozer for the Sallisaw district,” he said. “Before that we had to put out the fires with a leaf blower and a rake. We later got a better dozer with a climate controlled cabin, so the equipment has really been upgraded since I’ve been here.”

Along with the task of fire protection, the Oklahoma Forestry Service works with private landowners, municipalities, civic

organizations and school groups to promote fire prevention. They assist with the development of Community Wildfire Protection Plans and Firewise Plans, while also conducting fire prevention activities including displays at public events, school programs and Smokey Bear visits.