

Western Wildfires –

Whenever a plea is made for firefighting personnel, whether by the U.S. Forest Service or another state, Alabama Forestry Commission employees are always quick to answer the call. With Washington and Oregon both experiencing some of the largest wildfires in their histories this past summer, they requested assistance. Collectively, the AFC sent out 15 wildland firefighters on these Western details to assist with wildfire suppression efforts through an agreement with the Forest Service. These individuals were selected based on their qualifications and their availability each week for ROSS, the Forest Service “Resource Ordering and Status System.”

In mid-July, seven AFC associates responded for details in single resource positions such as Heavy Equipment Boss, Strike Team Leader - Heavy Equipment, or Crew Boss. Derrick Heckman (St. Clair County) and James “Moto” Williams (Chambers County) both received assignments in Washington State. Five men were dispatched to wildfires in Oregon, including Ethan Barrett (Hale County), Jason Berry (Walker County), Michael King (Crenshaw County), Joel Bartlett (Marion County), and Hank McKinley (Tuscaloosa County). Wildfire assignments included the Carlton Complex, Shaniko Butte, Bridge 99 Complex, and Sunflower, among others.

Another eight AFC firefighters were activated on July 25. Assembling at the National Forests of Alabama office in Montgomery, they were part of a 20-man wildfire suppression hand crew deployed to the Carlton Complex in Washington State. Crew members from the AFC included: Joey Donnelly (Escambia County), Dearl Driggers (Geneva County), Rickey Fields (Baldwin County), Ashley Haden (Russell County), Keith Niedermeier (Cherokee County), Jeffrey Owens

(Butler County), Lester Williams (Geneva County), and Shane Woodham (Cherokee County). They returned to Alabama on August 14.

Additionally, Joel Bartlett departed for a second tour on August 9, headed to Washington State to assist as a Heavy Equipment Boss with the Snag Canyon wildfire response. Moto Williams and Michael King also departed for a second tour on September 22, assigned to the large King Fire in California. All returned safely.

According to State Forester Greg Pate, these AFC firefighters are required to pass the strictest training and physical fitness requirements. Most are veterans of Western details in recent years, having previously fought wildfires in states including California, Idaho, Montana, Oklahoma, Oregon, and Texas. “Although our staff is extremely small, we feel the need to help our sister states and brotherhood of firefighters in their time of need,” said Pate. “The experience these firefighters gain through such assignments helps us in meeting our mandate of suppressing forest fires in Alabama.”





ANSWERING THE CALL TO BATTLE