



'Baptism by Fire'

My First Wildfire Season

By Matthew Sorrells, Jefferson County Forester, Alabama Forestry Commission

Hired into the Alabama Forestry Commission as a new forester on September 1 of 2016, I realized my role would be tough when it came to wildfires since I was currently the only employee for Jefferson County. Having background experience on prescribed burns, I already possessed an understanding of fire weather. However, as far as being a wildland firefighter, I was green as grass.

Until taking the agency's course on Heavy Equipment Training, I didn't know how to operate or maintain the fire suppression equipment. I have Forestry Specialist Dearl Driggers from the Southeast Region to thank for everything I learned during that week-long class. He trained me how to operate a dozer and transport, and emphasized the importance of communication with the 'ground man.' Little did he know, along with the rest of those course teachers, they would be coming to see me real soon in Jefferson County.

It was the drought-generated fall wildfire season of 2016, and I had a literal 'baptism by fire' in my first three months. Many have come before me, but probably few have undergone the same situation as I did. From October 1 to December 1, Jefferson County experienced a total of 64 wildfires consuming 2,086 acres. I won't say that it was the worst scenario in the state, but it was definitely difficult in my circumstances as a brand new 'lone ranger' employee. Thanks to AFC leadership, we were able to get an emergency rotation of firefighting crews and equipment from the southern half of the state to come and assist the northern regions during that period of time. About the middle of the first week of each rotation, there was usually a conversation that went along the lines of "I think I'll stick to my flat ground," as if

the hills in their southern counties had a 'Home Sweet Home' sign on them.

It's hard to recall each fire, but I do remember my first was in the Adger community. Soon after, I would come to know Adger like the back of my hand. Those crews that were stationed with me in Jefferson would soon relate Adger to one of those four letter words that if your momma heard you say them, she would wash your mouth out with soap. For lack of a better description, I like to call that entire corner of Jefferson County 'Highwall Heaven,' although others might consider it a little further south of Heaven.

As with most of the old fire season stories I've heard, there was little sleep over those two months. A 'good night's rest' was typically three to four hours. I can remember on a few occasions coming back to the office and resting on a cot since sunrise was only a couple hours away. There was even one week I was afraid to take a shower, because every time I turned on the water I got a fire call! I'm sure everyone around me was thankful I eventually did wash off the 'stank.' MREs ('meals ready to eat' military rations) and water were always kept in my truck, just in case we were out on a call past two meal times.

I want to extend my gratitude to everyone I met during that first fire season. Special thanks to the fire crews that rotated through Jefferson County. Each person brought knowledge and experience. I took the time to soak up every bit I could because it's not every day you get an outside perspective. Our workforce is dwindling, but I encourage those of us that have just begun to seek out the veterans that have been here a while, before they decide to move on and we lose that experience and insight. You never know what you might learn from their wisdom. 🙏