FIRE: Holding the Line

Hannah Kwasman '13 Fights Wildfires and Helps Manage Forests Throughout the West

Hannah Kwasman, Senior Firefighter

It's 3pm. Sweat is dripping into my eye. Just hiked 30 minutes up a steep, forested hillside. My back aches from carrying line gear and a chainsaw.

The crew is grouped up, drinking water and eating a quick snack while our Captain is scouting up ahead. Some jokes are made. Eyes are scanning the canopy, assessing hazards, noticing where the Chinook helicopter is working bucket drops. Smoke is drifting uphill. Hearts pounding from the hike and from adrenaline, getting ready to engage a new start on our home forest. Some trees torch up ahead.

The Captain comes back, briefs the crew on lookouts, communications, escape routes, and our safety zone. Knowing our task, I hike ahead with my saw partner, ready to plug in in front of the dig, who's anchoring into a rock band at the heel of the fire. I put my earpro in, take the sheath off the saw, and am ready to engage.

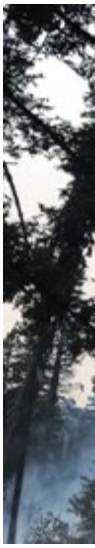
Last season I was hired by the U.S. Forest Service as a full-time senior firefighter on Snowslide Wildland Fire Module (WFM), part of the McCall Ranger District located on the Payette National Forest in the mountains of central Idaho. Snowslide is a 10-person, Type-1 hand crew that responds to fires locally, regionally, and nationally.

WFMs have a unique skill set, in that they're highly adaptable to a variety of tasks in both wildfire response and prescribed fire, such as initial attack, long-term planning, ignitions, suppression, and fire effects monitoring. These skills emphasize managing fire in order to fulfill its natural or historic role and to meet resource and management objectives.

I've worked for the US Forest Service going on seven years, two of them as a Wilderness Ranger in the Sierra Nevada mountains in central California, one season as a helitack crew member (a crew that is specially trained in the tactical and logistical use of helicopters for fire suppression) in Northern California, and I'm currently heading into my fourth season on Snowslide WFM in McCall, Idaho.

As a senior firefighter and the primary EMT on my crew, I help ensure the crew is functioning to its highest level, overseeing and working alongside members of my crew in daily operations as well as leading training, especially those that are medically focused. Having responded to four medicals in 2021, I'm able to draw upon past experiences as learning opportunities in what went well and what can be done better in terms of rapidly evacuating a patient in the middle of the woods. I'm also a primary sawyer, cutting fire line and felling fire-weakened hazard trees to secure the fire and allowing people to work safely in the area.

Last fire season, my crew finished up critical training in late April, then headed to New Mexico for the Calf Canyon fire. Capable of being self-sufficient, we were staged in the Pecos Wilderness protecting structures, mitigating hazardous fuels, and scouting for potential holding features. This includes "ground truthing," which entails walking, driving, or flying around in a helicopter looking for natural features that can hold up a fire, such as a road, ridge tops, rocky outcroppings, or a river. Fires need fuel to burn, hence why we "dig line" (scrape down to bare dirt) so fire cannot escape. Typical "off-forest" fire assignments, where we leave our home forest and travel elsewhere, are fourteen 16-hour days, plus extra days for travel. When we get home, we have three mandatory days off where we can't be called into work (known as RnR), enabling us to travel outside the normal 2-hour call back range and to be outside of cell service. When we're not on RnR, we can be called at any moment to respond to a new fire on forest.



Fire crew approaching a blaze

Since RnR is our guaranteed time off, it's a good time to get out of town and do something fun, or lie low and relax. In the past I've gone backpacking in the Seven Devils Wilderness, rafting on the Payette River, and car camping along the Salmon River. It's also a good time to head down to Boise or up to Spokane and see a concert. I often like staying local and enjoying summer in McCall, doing day hiking/biking/rafting trips and paddle boarding around Payette Lake. I adopted a dog in October (his name is Hucklebear), so I imagine this summer's RnR will be spent running around the mountains with him!

After two off-forest assignments, Snowslide is typically held at home on the Payette due to local fire danger. Being situated at 5,200ft in elevation, fire season on the Payette usually doesn't kick off until mid-July or early August. As an initial attack (IA) resource, we must be ready to respond to a new wildfire start at any time. The 2022 season we responded to seven initial attack fires, ranging from a single night to a full 14-day assignment. While we often drive and then hike to fires, it's not uncommon for us to fly into the Frank Church Wilderness for fire assignments as well.

My supervisor tries to send individuals out for training opportunities on different resources each season. Last year I went on a two-week assignment with Logan Hotshots to gain experience working on a 20-person crew fighting fires in Oregon and Washington.

The year prior I detailed with a helitack crew in Nevada to finish up my Helicopter Crewmember taskbook. Position taskbooks identify the competencies, behaviors, and tasks that personnel should demonstrate to become qualified in that position. For example, to become a qualified Helicopter Crewmember, you first need to take a week-long class, then prove proficient at tasks on the fireline like giving a passenger briefing for a helicopter, constructing and managing a helispot, and preparing a cargo load. Completing a taskbook can take one season, or it can take three, given the opportunities that you've had throughout the season.

Depending on local fire danger and forest priority for prescribed burns, Snowslide often goes off-forest for an assignment in late September. Last season however, we stayed home to burn thousands of acres for prescribed fire. After the Great Fire of 1910 around Wallace, ID, the US Forest Service operated under the rule "fires must be suppressed by 10am the next day." As all fires over the last century have been fully suppressed, disrupting natural fire regimes region-wide, forest fuel loading has increased, contributing to more severe fires.

Kwasman cutting down a dead tree

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"If you live in a 'wildland urban interface,' like up in the hills near Mt. Spokane or have a cabin at Priest Lake, do your part by thinning trees near your house and limbing branches. And recreate responsibly!"
- Hannah Kwasman

It wasn't until recently that prescribed fire has become a tool for managing our forest ecosystems. Under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law as part of the Forest Service's Wildfire Crisis Strategy, the Payette National Forest is designated as part of the Southwest Idaho Wildfire Crisis Landscape Project, a multi-agency effort to treat 1.7 million acres (500,000 of which are on the Payette) to build forest resiliency. This includes non-commercial thinning (which my crew does for project work around the forest in between fire calls), prescribed fire, commercial thinning, and reforestation.

Prescribed burns are always fun. Utilizing drip torches, crew members hike around the landscape using varying firing patterns to maximize resource benefits, as well as using aerial ignitions via helicopter or drone. Most prescribed fire manages to reduce the amount of ground fuel and brush so if a new fire starts in the heat of summer, fire intensity won't be as bad. We often target certain tree species, like grand fir, to kill off, while giving a buffer or limiting fire intensity around ponderosa pine or tamarack larch.

Marching single file on a back country road

Holding the line on the edge of a burn

The historical mismanagement of our forests is what is affecting the frequency and severity of fires that we fight. Sure, climate change has increased the habitable range of bark beetle, contributing to more beetle-kill trees in a forest, and we are also seeing a trend in longer fire seasons. But the most important factor is the history of disrupting forest ecosystems' natural fire regime, leading to denser, unhealthier, and less resilient forests. I'm excited to be a part of the next generation of wildland firefighters who want to see certain fires managed under tactics other than full suppression, and we're putting in hard work in the spring and fall to help make our forests more resilient.

Although this line of work consists of long days that are mentally and physically taxing, I love working hard and facing challenges head on. Every day is (mostly) different, and despite best efforts you never really know what's going to happen next. I'm stoked to have found a job that lets me live and work in the mountains and forests in the summer and to be a ski and SCUBA bum in the winter.

But as for now, I'll be puttin' my boots on in the morning.

– Hannah Kwasman, Class of 2013