

# **OKLAHOMA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND FORESTRY**

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## **Oklahoma Forestry Services assists in major 2015 U.S. wildfires**

Firefighters could hear it long before they could see it.

A curtain of smoke was before them in the rugged terrain of northern Idaho. This area of the Mountain West and other areas of the nation were under a fiery attack that had more teeth and combined challenges to it than many previous major fires.

The magnitude of the situation between mid-August and early September was staggering.

In that short period, Oklahoma Forestry Services (OFS), a division of the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry, sent 29 individuals and two engines to help battles wildfires in eight states. These individuals worked on various teams. Oklahoma Forestry Services joins with other states and federal agencies in allowing qualified staff to accept assignments to work on wildfires across the nation, while maintaining fire coverage at home. Not only are Oklahomans able to help others in need, but the knowledge gained at these major fires allows them to bring that experience back home to be used in fighting wildland fires in Oklahoma.

One of the experienced people who served on Western fires this summer is Mark Goeller. He is the Assistant Director/Fire Management Chief for OFS. Goeller has served since the early 1980s as a firefighter on national incident management teams through the National Wildfire Coordinating Group.

Through training and experience, Goeller has risen to the level of Operations Section Chief on one of only 17 Type 1 national incident management teams in the United States.

In this particular case he and his team were assigned to some of the fire complexes in the Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forest in Idaho. A fire complex is a group of fires located near each other.

“Some of the guys out on the line, they couldn’t even see the fire. They could hear it, but they couldn’t see it,” Goeller said. “The smoke reduced visibility to less than a hundred feet on some days.

“We bank on what we call LCES: Lookouts, Communications, Escape Routes and Safety Zones. If you have those four things in place your likelihood of injury or death is greatly reduced. We try to have LCES set up on all of our operations. When you have visibility that poor, number one as you can imagine, you have no lookout, you can’t see anything. So do you really want to engage in firefighting in those conditions? Also one of the things that was striking compared to previous years was the number of fires at the same time.”

That led to a substantial strain on resources.

**ALL ELEMENTS AT ONE TIME**

Drew Daily, a Forest Protection Staff Forester for Oklahoma Forestry Services, serves as Division/Group Supervisor on the same elite team as Goeller. According to Goeller, “We’re the toolbox. Drew gets to take all the tools out and put all the nuts and bolts together to make it work.”

That wasn’t easy.

“I would say that every element we dealt with, we’ve dealt with before. But this year, they were all sort of jammed into the same time frame,” Daily said. “We’ve dealt with span of control (the number of personnel that one person can effectively manage) that was out of whack before. We’ve dealt with communication problems. We’ve dealt with limitation of resources. Sometimes we have one or two of those elements, but this year they seemed to be all present at the same time.”

When Daily and others arrived in the Northwest, they were told at an in-briefing that during a one-day period there had been about 70 new fire starts in a single ranger district. Most of these were caused by lightning, Daily said.

“We found out the next day, the actual number was 152 new starts in one 24-hour period in an area probably the size of four or five average-sized counties in Oklahoma,” Daily said. “Since most were lightning-caused, they weren’t just off a road with easy access.”

Again, this scenario was playing out across many areas. So because of the magnitude, every resource one could think of from aircraft to hoses was either in short supply or already being used elsewhere.

George Geissler, State Forester/Director of OFS, was at the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho, working as the representative for all state forestry agencies in a group that prioritizes and allocates resources to support the firefighting effort. Other team members represent the US Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, National Weather Service, National Park Service, Bureau of Indian Affairs, US Fish and Wildlife Services and US Fire Administration – FEMA.

Not only were radios in short supply, but so were frequencies used for communications, Geissler said. And not only were resources hard to come by, but in some cases those needed resources couldn’t be used even when available.

“There were aircraft that were grounded because you couldn’t fly them in the smoke,” Geissler said. “There were crews that you were trying to shift around, but you couldn’t fly them in and it would take too long to move them on the ground.”

There were many factors to consider.

“Not only do you have the complexity of the country it was in, but because of the location of a lot of these fires, there was the interaction and the interface that we had with urban development, communities and subdivisions and things like that,” Daily said. “For instance, the fire that Mark and I were on came basically out of the mountain rim that surrounds Kamiah, Idaho and pushed to near Kooskia, Idaho. Actually it pushed past it in some places. Not only did these fires involve what people think of as the Mountain West, the sort of ideal scenery that they look at, we also had the urban interface issue.”

So, not only were they fighting the fires at hand, but it was essential that they were thinking ahead.

“What’s our next step?” Goeller said. “We’re talking hundreds of people, how do you move that many people to a new spot if you need to? So we’re constantly making contingency plans.”

Michelle Finch-Walker, Communications Specialist and Public Information Officer (PIO) for Oklahoma Forestry Services, was working as a PIO with another Type 1 team about a 30-minute

drive from Goeller and Daily. At one point, Goeller and Daily were moved to another area. So, Finch-Walker's team took on a complex of fires, referred to as the Municipal Complex, which Goeller and Daily's team had fought.

"When we took over your fire," she said to Goeller and Daily recently, "the fire wasn't moving any more thanks to the good work by your team. But the communities were still on high-alert because they had been at their homes and watching this thing. Our Deputy Incident Commander said this is an information fire because the people in what we called the donut hole, the area surrounded by these complexes that became one, were on such high alert even though the fire was pretty much done. You could certainly understand their concern."

Not only was the area far-reaching, but these situations continued for days upon days.

The amount of time those from Oklahoma served on the fires varied. But as an example, Goeller was assigned to the fires for 18 days, Daily was there 23 days, Geissler 10 days and Finch-Walker for 20 days. Those out on the fire complexes were usually sleeping in tents, although that accounted for only a small portion of the day.

Daily would wake up at 4:30 in the morning and probably get to bed about 11 to 11:30 that night. Goeller's first meeting of the day, attended by a group including Daily, was at 5:30 a.m. and his schedule would include an information-sharing meeting at noon.

"We'd discuss what had changed and how that would impact logistics such as how do we feed these people if they are going to stay out there instead of all coming back to camp," Goeller said. Work would continue throughout the day and at 9 p.m. there was a debriefing to see if the plan for the next morning was still valid. They'd eat dinner around 10 p.m. and go to bed within the next hour and a half.

The dedication of all who helped on fires in the various states served those areas well.

It also benefits Oklahoma, according to Geissler.

"It takes a variety of skill-sets to create an incident management team, and we are fortunate to have some extremely accomplished people," Geissler said. "It is good for our state to have this expertise."

In this case nearly every state participated and there were crews from Australia, Canada, England, New Zealand and other countries. And while there were 17 Type 1 teams at work, there were more than 30 Type 2 teams or "initial attack crews." Daily refers to them as the "backbone of our firefighting community."

"One of the reasons for the success is the commitment of these people," Goeller said. "This isn't an easy thing. It's a commitment from a guy like George to support this and a commitment of the agency to train to this level and partake of it."

## **BACK HOME**

Goeller said the experience not only makes the individual better, but helps them train and inform others they may work around during a fire in this state.

"If you think about it, we could stay in Oklahoma and never leave the state," Goeller said, "but we're getting to practice at a level that you don't see that often and we're getting to do it somewhere else that prepares us to bring that experience back here when we need it.

"That's what it's all about. We bring back our experiences from there to prepare us for any type of emergency here."

Sometimes it may be a small wildland fire in the state. However, other times it may be much larger. Most importantly it may play a role in saving lives. The experience may also help save structures and it may reduce costs, according to Goeller.

He mentioned a series of wildfires that began in late 2005 and continued into early 2006 near Shawnee.

“We were out at Shawnee for 83 days,” Goeller said. “We brought over 600 people here from 33 states to help with all the fires we were having here. It cost the state about \$12 million, although we got a lot of money back from FEMA. But the team that Drew and I are on, those Type 1 teams, they usually spend a \$1 million a day. So the fact that we were able to do what we did here in Oklahoma at that same level and only spend \$12 million in 83 days was a huge accomplishment.”

Finch-Walker has been working national fires for several years and she also believes it has helped her during fires in her home state.

“It makes me much better at my job,” she said.

Geissler said that working on the national fires also helps local and volunteer firefighters in Oklahoma.

Oklahoma Forestry Services offers Wildland Training for Structural Firefighters, G-130. The course is designed to help structural firefighters learn the critical wildland firefighting skills needed to be safe and effective in either of two situations: when making an initial attack on a wildland fire in their jurisdiction or when working with state and federal wildland firefighting agencies. About 110 individuals have completed this training already. Eight helped with national fires last year and four assisted this year, according to Goeller.

Paul Smith, a Corporal with the Mustang Fire Department, has completed the G-130 training and worked as a Line Qualified Emergency Medical Technician along the Washington and Idaho state line for 14 days.

Smith wrote an email to Goeller upon returning home:

“I just recently returned from 14 days in Washington and wanted to thank you for your part in making available such an extraordinary opportunity. I met more people in 14 days that only the word Fantastic can describe. I’m not the same person I was due to this collective endeavor as I’m certain that you understand.

“So thank you.”

**Following is a list of those who have taken out-of-state fire assignments in 2015, including the organization by name, the Incident Command System position while on assignment, State, and the name of the fire:**

Page Belcher, Status Check-In Recorder, WA-Okonagon Complex

Drew Carr, Heavy Equipment Boss, TX-East Texas Initial Attack Support

Rick Chambliss, Supervisory Dispatcher, AR-Arkansas-Oklahoma Interagency Coordination Center Support (two details)

Drew Daily, Division/Group Supervisor, ID-Clearwater Complex, ID-Motorway Complex

Joe Emberson, Ground Support Unit Leader, MT-Reynolds Fire, ID-Municipal Complex

Judy Farley, Personnel Time Recorder, WA-Okonagon Complex

Michelle Finch, Public Information Officer, Type 1, ID-Municipal Complex

Terron Gee, Heavy Equipment Boss, CA-River Complex

George Geissler, Agency Representative, ID-National Multiagency Coordination Group Support

Mark Goeller, Operations Section Chief, Type 1, ID-Clearwater Complex, ID-Motorway Complex  
Ty Gorham, Firefighter, Type 2, MT-Severity  
Aaron Grey, Heavy Equipment Boss, CA-River Complex  
David Hadley, Engine Operator, MT-Severity  
Bob Harrel, Logistics Section Chief, Type 2, MT-Bear Fire, NC-Bald Knob Fire, AK-Healy Lake Fire  
Wes Hayes, Initial Attack Dispatcher & Support Dispatcher, CO-Ft. Collins Coordination Center Support; AR-Arkansas-Oklahoma Interagency Coordination Center Support  
Andy James, Operations Section Chief, Type 2, MT-Reynolds Fire  
Harley Johnson, Engine Boss, CA-River Complex  
James Johnson, Engine Boss, MT-Severity  
Tama Lester, Ordering Manager, ID-Cougar Fire, ID-Avery Complex  
Bobby Lyons, ENGB, MT-Severity  
Alan Nevel, Field Observer, OR-Canyon Creek Complex  
Rick O'Daniel, Operations Branch Director, ID-Municipal Complex, ID-Clearwater Complex  
Steve Painter, Engine Operator, MT-Severity  
William Ryles, Firefighter, Type 2, CA-River Complex  
Bill Scott, Communications Unit Leader (trainee), ID-Motorway Complex  
Paul Smith, Line Qualified EMT, WA-Kanisku Complex  
Jimmy Warner, Line Qualified EMT, ID-Municipal Complex  
Jerrod Williams, Firefighter, Type 2, MT-Severity  
Pat Wayman, Heavy Equipment Boss, Division/Group Supervisor (trainee), WA-Wolverine Fire, WA-Graves Mountain Fire

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Photo caption: Between mid-August and early September, Oklahoma Forestry Services (OFS), a division of the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry, sent 29 individuals and two engines to help battle wildfires in eight states. These individuals worked on various teams. Oklahoma Forestry Services joins with other states and federal agencies in allowing qualified staff to accept assignments to work on wildfires across the nation, while maintaining fire coverage at home in Oklahoma. These photos were taken in Idaho.