

A NATIONAL FITNESS REGIMEN WOULD BENEFIT FIREFIGHTER SAFETY AND EFFECTIVENESS



Paul Keller

Most people like to gripe about the way it is. Others would rather do something about it. Meet Bequi Livingston.

In 1984, the former Nike “Body Elite” representative and Nike-sponsored runner was working as an engine crew member for the Smokey Bear Ranger District in Ruidoso, NM. She realized that a well-structured wildland firefighter fitness program was—unfortunately—lacking.

A multisport athlete, certified aerobics instructor, and national aerobics-fitness consultant, Livingston also knew that physical fitness and overall wellness are critical to the safety of all fire and aviation management personnel. She wanted to do something about the obvious need for a coordinated firefighter-specific fitness program.

So she did.

Thanks to Livingston, “Fireline Fitness”—an exciting, innovative, and novel approach to physical health and conditioning for wildland firefighters—was born.

Improve Effectiveness and Safety

“It’s a known fact that physical fitness plays an important role in improving firefighter effectiveness and safety both on and off the fire-

line,” says Livingston, who is now the wildland fire operations health and safety specialist for the USDA Forest Service’s Southwestern Region. “There is no better time than now to become proactive and commit to the personal responsibility of both personal health and wellness.”

“The intent of the Fireline Fitness program is to provide wildland firefighters with the basic information

“Fireline Fitness” is an exciting, innovative, and novel approach to physical health and conditioning for wildland firefighters.

for empowering them to develop a fitness regime that is basic and balanced—while still meeting the demands of wildland fire,” she notes.

Livingston emphasizes that her program is all about the basics. “It’s nothing fancy. It’s nothing extreme,” she assures. “It basically just utilizes good old common sense and moderation.”

Her Fireline Fitness program has continued to evolve over the years—taking into account valuable lessons learned from the wildland fire community. Today, it provides guidelines to help develop both

individual and crew firefighter fitness programs. It is a fitness regime that incorporates cardiovascular endurance, muscle strength and endurance, and flexibility—while simultaneously emphasizing overall wellness.

Off-Season Guidelines

To ensure that firefighters maintain an acceptable level of fitness, this unique program also provides guidelines on how to continue implementing a fitness regime during the off-season. “This also encourages overall health while making it easier to transition into fire season,” says Livingston. “In doing so, Fireline Fitness empowers the firefighter to take personal responsibility for his or her own fitness level.”

Once implemented, she says, the potential benefits are immediate. Direct savings to the USDA Forest Service and interagency partners occur through:

- The decline of Occupational Workers Compensation claims,
- Minimizing lost time due to injuries and incidents related to the Work Capacity Test, and
- Remedying improper physical fitness training, and the overuse of injuries.

“It is a proven fact that physically fit firefighters have fewer injuries and illnesses when a proper fitness program is in place—and supported,” says Livingston. She points out

Paul Keller is the managing editor of Fire Management Today.

that when a consistent fitness and wellness program is implemented and supported by management, these benefits also include:

- Lower absenteeism,
- Increased morale,
- Crew cohesion, and
- Improved productivity.

Healthy Workforce

Other benefits to an established wellness program include fatigue management and mitigation, proper hydration, good nutrition, and stress management. “These are all critical factors related directly to decisionmaking and human factors during incidents,” says Livingston.

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She adds that she believes Fireline Fitness would also be a beneficial supplement to the current policies and procedures associated with work-rest guidelines and driving policies.

Bottom line: by promoting a healthy wildland fire workforce, the Fireline Fitness program benefits the agency as well as the individual. ■

More information on the Fireline Fitness program—including its pretest, weekly workout, and exercise logs—is linked to the USDA Forest Service Website <<http://www.fs.fed.us/fire/safety/>>. Or contact Bequi Livingston at 505-842-3412; blivingston@fs.fed.us.