

MIDEWIN INTERAGENCY HOTSHOT CREW REPORTS FATALITY

(Wilmington) April 25, 2004 -- One firefighter was killed and another severely injured in an accident that occurred while the Midewin Interagency Hotshot Crew was en route to their home base after being released from a fire assignment in Florida. The Midewin Hotshots, based in Wilmington, Illinois had been assigned to the East Fork Fire on the Apalachicola National Forest.

The accident occurred late Friday night, April 23, in West Memphis, Arkansas. Al Toepke, 30, was killed, and Vance Hazelton, 30, was injured and remains in serious condition in Memphis, Tennessee. Both men were from Winona, Minnesota, and were employed by the U.S. Forest Service for the Midewin Hotshots based on the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie in Illinois.

The cause of the accident is under investigation by the local authorities and the U.S. Forest Service.

Funeral services for Al Toepke are scheduled for 1:00 p.m., Friday, April 30, at Peace Church in New Salem, North Dakota. A memorial service is scheduled for 1:00 p.m., Saturday, May 8, in Winona, Minnesota. The location of the memorial service will be announced later.

The Toepke family has requested that contributions in Al's memory be made to either of two organizations:

- Dakota Pheasants Forever, Bismarck, North Dakota (www.dakotapf.com)
- YMCA Camp Olson to support cabin restoration or camper scholarships as it celebrates its 50th anniversary in 2004 (4160 Little Big Boy Road NE, Longville, MN 56655).

This was Al Toepke's second season as a wildland firefighter on the Midewin Interagency Hotshot Crew. He had worked for the U.S. Forest Service previously in Ketchikan, Alaska on the Tongass National Forest, followed by jobs with the Minnesota Conservation Corps, and as a general laborer in Montana.

Vance Hazelton is a crew squad boss and began his firefighting career in 1998 in Alaska, followed by positions in Wisconsin and North Carolina.

Cards and letters to both families may be sent in care of the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie, 30239 S. State Route 53, Wilmington, IL 60481.