

Forester's Log: Oklahoma Fire Response

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The Forester's Log is a syndicated monthly column published in newspapers and magazines primarily in the American west. Mary Stuever is the Burn Area Emergency Rehabilitation Coordinator for the White Mountain Apache Tribe.

Working in the vast ponderosa pine forests of the Southwest, I sometimes get strange looks when I reveal I earned my undergraduate forestry degree in Oklahoma. Despite the eastern pines and central cross-timbers, the Sooner State doesn't usually conjure up images of forests. Most years Oklahoma doesn't conjure up images of forest fires either. However, since November, the state has been a literal hotbed of wildland fire activity.



A brush fire in the Arbuckle Mountains in southcentral Oklahoma makes a run for Interstate 35 in response to erratic winds from a cold front. (February 16, 2005)

Recording just under a half million scorched acres burned in just over two thousand fires since November 5, 2005, Oklahoma is experiencing one its worst fire seasons in recorded history. Recently I was dispatched to my old stomping grounds as one of thousands of firefighters from over thirty-five states who have spent time this winter chasing brush and grass fires around the state.

When I arrived at the Incident Command Post in Shawnee, Oklahoma I was greeted by Mark Bays, a college classmate who is the urban forester with the Oklahoma Forestry Division. Among Mark's many accomplishments is nursing back to health an elm tree that survived the blast that brought down the Alfred P. Murrah Building. Mark was now part of a team lead by Oklahoma Forestry Division employees to survive another event in recent Oklahoma history. The division's main objective is to support the scattered network of rural fire departments battling fires that often number more than twenty each day.

In a sustained effort that has already lasted for several months, firefighters from across the country bring their engines, dozers, air tankers, and other tools to assist with blazes that generally are extinguished on the same day they start. Burning in grass and brush, these wildfires blacken thousands of acres daily, and have this winter destroyed over 200 homes.

“We were getting lots of national media attention at the end of December and in early January,” information officer Michelle Finch explained, “but once the national media’s attention was distracted by mine accidents, they haven’t really come back to us.”

On my fifth day in Oklahoma I witnessed three homes destroyed by fire.

The Forestry Division and their extended support represent only a portion of firefighters committed to the Oklahoma effort. The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) carries responsibility on fires impacting the checkerboard pattern of Indian lands in what was once all Indian Territory. The BIA also headquarters their fire response at the Shawnee Incident Command Post to ensure coordinated efforts with the state.

Coordination is the key word, as the first and often last firefighters on the fires are from local fire departments. My experience on the ground with these departments was extremely varied. Some departments had state-of-the-art, mouth-watering (at least for this ol’ firefighter), vehicle mounted laptops that conjured satellite furnished images of the area. Meanwhile other departments were operating ancient federal excess firefighting equipment from the 1950’s and 1960’s. I even met a team of ranch hands who had built the fire engine they staffed just the week before in response to a fire that had threatened their local horse ranch.

My tour of duty was cut short by an emergency back in Arizona with my regular job, but when I left Oklahoma there had been a few days of icy sleet and snow. The fire behavior specialist didn’t expect the reprieve to last any more than a week before fire activity would pick up again.

With fires this year already burning in Texas, Oklahoma, Arizona, New Mexico and California, and very little snow or moisture in the high country, fire managers are preparing for an early and intense wildfire season throughout the Southwest. However without thunderstorms and associated lightning, most fires this spring and early summer will be started by people. Perhaps we can learn a lesson from the winter fires of Oklahoma and pass the word for everyone to be especially careful this year with any ignition sources.

For more information on Oklahoma Wildfires visit <http://www.oda.state.ok.us/forestry-fireupdates.htm>.