



Mid-Plains Handcrew Receives National Award; Crew Trains for 2005 Fire Season

NEBRASKA - Twenty-six members of the Mid-Plains Interagency Handcrew gathered for training and orientation in Halsey, Nebraska in mid-May 2005 to make their team into a top-notch wildland firefighting resource for the Great Plains states. Among them were three men who were recognized nationally for excellence in leading the crew.

Firefighters Pat Harty and Todd Schmidt of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Rodney Redinger of the Kansas Forest Service, who rotate as crew boss, received the 2005 Paul Gleason Lead By Example Award for mentoring the handcrew and building them into a true team. The national award was created in memory of wildland firefighter Paul Gleason who was best known for developing the LCES concept (Lookouts, Communication, Escape routes, Safety zones), which has become the foundation of wildland firefighter safety. The award, which covers several areas of excellence, honors those who demonstrate the leadership for which Gleason was known. The National Wildfire Coordinating Group names winners each spring based on nominations.

Like the experienced crew bosses, the Mid-Plains firefighters are mostly return crewmembers, though some are new to the team. A handcrew is a team of firefighters specifically trained and organized to fight wildfires with limited or no water, instead using hand tools and chainsaws. The Mid-Plains handcrew comprises employees from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, National Park Service and the Kansas Forest Service and come from Kansas, Nebraska, Colorado and South Dakota. The training and orientation session was a first for the handcrew, but plans call for the training to become an annual event.

The crew's formation has increased collaboration between participating agencies, and has made for good community relations in Mid-Plains states. Training included a formal classroom course as well as field training in radio operations, field ignition, physical fitness, map/compass reading, and an idea borrowed from the military: sand tables. This involves drawing a rough scene in dirt, or sand, to illustrate firefighting tactics and is a way to test a firefighter's ability to make decisions.

The week of training ended with the crew breaking into squads for dispatch to simulated fires. There the designated squad leaders practiced making critical decisions during a simulated fire. The firefighters filled out evaluation forms after the training, praising the field exercise portion as extremely helpful. The squad bosses chosen to lead the teams during the simulated fires will be the primary squad bosses for the handcrew this summer.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service sponsored the training in partnership with the Kansas Forest Service and the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

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