

Eastern Montana County Assist Team

Lands in eastern Montana are better protected from wildfire with the formation of a Type 3 Incident Management Team called a County Assist Team. The County Assist Team was initially formed to help rural and volunteer fire departments with wildfires. Over time the team, currently hosted by the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, has become vital to local, state, and federal agencies in assisting with wildfires that are too complex or large for the local initial attack forces to manage.



Firefighters get on-the-job training at the training camp.

Team members are rural fire department volunteers in their counties of residence who wear not only two hats, but sometimes three or four. This team is unique because core members are local eastern Montana residents from a variety of professions.

The team includes a county extension agent with the Montana State University system, county sheriff, foreman of a pipeline and well company, mechanic-plumber, electrical shop owner, appraisal serviceman for farms and ranches, state fire marshal, school employees, ranchers, farmers, and county fire wardens, along with employees from state and federal agencies. All dedicate a lot of time and effort to help fight wildfires in a safe and efficient manner.

The importance of the team to eastern Montana is significant. Being composed of local residents, members' response times to incidents is much quicker than that of a Type 1 or Type 2 Incident Management Team. The County Assist Team strives to adhere to local jurisdictional policy and has an amazing ability to bring together leaders from communities and management from different agencies. Local government, volunteer fire departments, and landowners are comfortable working with this team since they know its members as neighbors, friends, or even family members.

The Community Assist Team is working to continue "interagency" with the addition of additional BLM and U.S. Forest Service employees. According to Randy Sanders, Department of Natural Resources and Conservation Fire Program Manager, "The more we federal, state, and local agencies communicate and collaborate, the better we work together and build trust."



Doug Williams, Community Assist Team Incident Commander talks to firefighters during the annual training camp.



Because of its importance to eastern Montana, Randy hopes similar teams can be created in the state.

Rural fire department members are key components of the team who maintain National Wildfire Coordinating Group certification qualification and standards. In 2002 core members attended the Complex Incident Management Course in Redding, California. This course was a competitive and intense nine-day classroom simulation which developed and enhanced the knowledge and skills of the Type 3 Incident Management Team.

The Rural Fire Assistance program adds to the Community Assist Team by helping rural department volunteers get the proper training to stay qualified and improve their capabilities. Rural Fire Assistance money has allowed the team to host a weekend “CAT Camp” or training camp. This annual camp trains new firefighters in wildland firefighting techniques and provides the required annual safety refresher such as shelter deployment. The camp depends on the Rural Fire Assistance funding in order to operate.

Contact: Dena Lang, Fire Mitigation and Education Specialist, BLM – Miles City Field Office, 406-233-2907