

National Fire Plan Black Hats Firefighters South Dakota 2002



By Bill Harlan, Journal Staff Writer, The Rapid City Journal

The Black Hats are back, ready to fight wildfires in the Black Hills.

Once an elite group of American Indian firefighters, the Black Hats were disbanded in the late 1980s. Fred Eagle Tail of Rapid City, who joined the original Black Hats as a teenager, said the team ran out of money. Efforts to revive the Black Hats in the early 1990s failed, Eagle Tail said, but he did not abandon the idea. Eagle Tail lost his job in January when a fire destroyed the Federal Beef packing plant in Rapid City, so he brought the Black Hat idea to state Wildland Fire Coordinator Joe Lowe.

The timing was perfect.

Lowe already wanted to form a new state “hand crew” to fight forest fires in the Black Hills. This spring, Lowe said he figured out how to revive the Black Hats with the help of a \$420,000 federal grant that also will benefit private landowners and the U.S. Forest Service.

“What I’ve got here is tradition,” Lowe said Tuesday, as he watched 20 new Black Hats thin a dangerously thick stand of ponderosa pines in rugged Gordon Gulch, south of Sheridan Lake. “This was a damn fine crew that never should have fallen by the wayside.”

Eagle Tail, 38, now is foreman of the new Black Hats, some of whom were barely in grade school when the original group disbanded. “The elders really wanted this,” Eagle Tail said. Like the Custer-based Tatanka Hot Shots, an elite “Type 1” hand crew, the Black Hats had been a source of pride for the Indian community.

Lowe and Eagle Tail brought the Black Hats back to life, but the revival also is due, in part, to the disastrous forest fires of the summer of 2000 — in the Black Hills and throughout the West. Congress responded with a National Fire Plan. It included money states could use for fire prevention, such as thinning trees in Gordon Gulch. In South Dakota, Gov. Bill Janklow responded by creating the new state Wildland Fire Suppression Division and hiring Lowe to run it.

Lowe came from California, where he had worked for more than two decades fighting wildfires. In fact, Lowe created the Orange County Fire Hand Crew Academy, which trained at U.S. Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton. Hand crews are the infantry of firefighting, using chainsaws and hand tools to cut lines close to fires, usually in difficult terrain. Lowe knew that thinning thick, nasty stands of timber would be a great way to train a fire crew, so he parlayed the National Fire Plan grant into his own “hand-crew academy.” The Black Hats will thin 135 acres in Gordon Gulch, then move to an area near the Beaver Park Roadless Area near Sturgis and, finally, to the Griggs Project near Spearfish.

They also are on call to respond quickly by truck to wildfires anywhere in the Black Hills. Later in the summer, they will be trained to respond in South Dakota Army National Guard helicopters. The crews are thinning private land, but landowners pay nothing. The \$420,000 also is a “no-match” grant, so the state also pays nothing. But the Forest Service benefits, Lowe said, because all the land is adjacent to thinning projects on the Black Hills National Forest.

The new Black Hats reported for work June 1. By Friday, they will be certified “Type 2” firefighters, a level below “hot shot.”

Lowe graduated six classes of hand crews in Orange County, but he believes that the new Black Hat team might be his best. “This one is a cut above,” he said. “They’ve already got esprit de corps and cohesiveness. You put them in rough timber, and they don’t whine.”

Gordon Gulch is full of rough timber. The ponderosa pines are so thick they can grow no bigger than an inch or two in diameter — so-called “dog hair.” Downed trees also choke many of the small, steep ravines leading into Gordon Gulch. Those ravines could act as “chimneys,” Lowe said, stoking wildfires that easily could climb downed timber into the crowns of taller trees. Compounding the problem, there are more than 40 summer cabins and trailers in Gordon Gulch. A tangled acre of Gordon Gulch forest might contain 80 tons of fuel, Lowe said. When the Black Hats are done, they will have about 20 tons per acre.

The Black Hats also spend part of each day training, beginning with a mile-and-a-half hike with packs that weigh nearly 30 pounds. They also learn fire behavior, map reading, pump operations and a laundry list of survival skills.

One of the most important skills on a hand crew is teamwork, and Lowe said Black Hat history helps. “My uncle was a Black Hat,” Dwight Pawnee Leggins, 30, of Rapid City said. When a cousin told him the group was forming again, he quickly volunteered. When his uncle heard, he drove all the way from Vermilion to congratulate him.

Dulcie Running Hawk, 34, also of Rapid City had worked on a Bureau of Indian Affairs hand crew 10 years ago. “This is a refresher course for me,” she said. “What this does is get me in better shape. And I love the work.” Running Hawk, like Eagle Tail and three other Black Hats, also lost her job in the Federal Beef fire. “Maybe that was a blessing,” Eagle Tail joked.

The crew is about two-thirds Indian, but Andrew Van Osdol, 19, a volunteer firefighter from Black Hawk, said he too appreciated the crew’s history. “It’s kind of cool,” he said. Camaraderie and trust save lives on fire lines Lowe said, and he is optimistic the new Black Hats could reach the elite “Type 1,” or “hot shot” level within a year or two. “They’re clicking already,” he said. “This is a 20-member fire family.”

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