

Illinois Wildland Fire Crew Assists in Western U.S. Fire Fight

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SPRINGFIELD, Ill. – A multi-agency wildland fire crew from Illinois recently returned from Colorado where they helped battle the more than 139,000-acre Pine Gulch Fire, the largest in Colorado history. Each year, the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) Division of Forest Resources assembles a team of highly trained firefighters to assist with wildfires in other states.

The 21-person crew included 14 representatives from IDNR plus the seven additional crew members from the U.S. Forest Service, Shawnee Resource and Conservation

District and The Nature Conservancy. In Colorado, the crew was teamed with crews of varying specialties, including bulldozer and road grader operators, to protect property and buildings and fortify fire breaks used to contain the blaze. The Illinois crew used chainsaws and other equipment to remove trees and brush that could provide fuel for the fire and dug fire lines around each building in jeopardy.

“I am grateful to our Illinois Wildland Fire Crew for their dedication and willingness to assist others during time of need,” said IDNR Director Colleen Callahan. “Our crew received high marks for their professionalism, experience and training during their deployment. Their presence on scene was very much appreciated.”

High temperatures and low humidity, in combination with steep slopes and already dry vegetation, created a volatile situation. The Pine Gulch fire started with a lightning strike and doubled in size daily due to the extreme weather conditions. Winds carried burning embers up to one-half mile from the advancing front of the fire, and new “spot” fires were common. The Illinois crew worked only minutes ahead of the front lines.

Illinois firefighters worked in tandem with Hotshot Crews who continued to fight the fire at night. Supplemental drops of water and fire retardant from the air slowed the fire. Illinois crew members helped pump water thousands of feet from a small beaver pond to the ridgetop fire line.

Each summer there are hundreds of western wildland fires with thousands of acres burned and numerous homes destroyed. Wildfire deployments last about 18 days. The Illinois crew returned home safely Aug. 24. The Pine Gulch Fire is now mostly contained.

“The entire wildland fire crew is grateful to Director Callahan for supporting the state’s efforts to render assistance to other states, even in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic,” said Tom Gargrave, fire crew chief and regional IDNR forester. “Not only were we able to render assistance to another state, but the training and experience our crew has gained will help us do a better job managing fire for ecological management and to protect others in the event of wildfires.”

All expenses are covered by the U.S. Forest Service through an interagency agreement with the IDNR Division of Forest Resources. All fire crews operate under protocols set up by the U.S. Forest Service to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Illinois Crewmembers include:

IDNR

Tom Gargrave – Forestry

Dave Griffith – Forestry
Ben Snyder – Forestry
Jenny Lesko-Forestry
Jim Tresouthick-Forestry
Bear Enbring-Forestry
Paul Bane-Forestry
Rich Lewis – Realty and Capital Planning
Ray Geroff – Natural Heritage
Nick Bumganer – Land Management
Steve Letizia-Land Management
Kayla Alexander-Land Management
Kyle Burkwald- Realty and Capital Planning
Adrian Walker- Grants Management

U.S. Forest Service
Grace Wu
Curt Martin
Hanna Hagarty
Jon Yeater
Hayden Brown

The Nature Conservancy
Nathan Speagle

Shawnee RC&D/USFS
Jacob Hess