

Firefighters from Pacific islands join fight against National Forest blazes

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MENDOCINO NATIONAL FOREST – Firefighters from islands in the Pacific have joined the fight to contain wildland fires on the Mendocino National Forest.

When lightning storms came through Northern California on June 21, nearly 1,800 fires were sparked across the California, which stretched local and state resources thin.

On the Mendocino National Forest, the Mendocino Hotshots and initial attack crews had already worked nonstop to suppress the Whiskey Fire that had begun earlier on June 12, forest officials reported. Despite fatigue they were able to contain that fire and seven others that began by the lightning storm on June 21 before being required to take a mandatory rest break.

As resources were thin fire officials called for assistance from out of the area.

On June 28, Rich Harvey's Interagency Management Team from the Great Basin (Nevada, Idaho, Utah and Wyoming), coming off the Clover Fire in Lone Pine, Calif., was redirected to the Mendocino National Forest to take over the 23 fires burning in the Yolla Bolly Wilderness.

However, the Great Basin is not the furthest distance from which help would come.

On July 5, the Bear Divide Hotshots reported to the incident and brought another crew with them – a 20-person crew from the island of Saipan in the Pacific Islands, forest officials reported. The Saipan crew is available through a cooperative agreement between the Pacific Islands and Region Five of the US Forest Service.

According to Germaine Burrows, acting emergency coordination center manager for the Mendocino National Forest in Willows, the Saipan crew members are excited to be here working in California.

“This is the seventh year crews have come to California. The cooperative program began in 2000,” Burrows said. “Applicants compete to be on the fire team, have to pass our physical fitness requirements, and look forward to coming to the mainland to help with our wildland fires. This has been a very positive relationship for the past several years.”

Burrows said there are four fire crews – one each from Saipan, American Samoa, Guam and Hawaii. “We recruit crew members every year, with many returning each year. It is very popular and most years we have more people apply for the crews than we can accommodate.”

The crews are trained by a cadre of experts from the US Forest Service's Region 5 fire professionals who go to the South Pacific Islands each April. They're put through the same standard “32 Hour Basic Wildland Firefighting” training as required for wildland firefighters working for the Forest Service.

Antony Babauta, superintendent of the Saipan crew, echoed the positive results of this program. “This gives the participants better experience and opportunities to compete for jobs,” said Babauta, who has brought crews to mainland United States for several fire seasons.

The cooperative program provides opportunity for the participants to gain wildland fire experience and is part of a grant offered by the US Forest Service, Region Five through its Fire and Aviation Management program. There also is a crew from American Samoa currently working with the Fulton Hotshots on fires in southern California.

After the crews have been paired with hotshot crews for 30 days, many are given the opportunity to continue on with hotshot crews or work with engine crews from around the state.

“We have had Pacific Island crews working with us in past years,” said Mike Alarid, superintendent of the Bear Divide Hotshots from the Angeles National Forest. “Last year we were able to keep two of the participants from the program on our crew all season.”

The Saipan crew will be with the Bear Divide Hotshots for the next 30 days, helping to suppress several of the many wildfires burning in California.

Harvey's Type 2 Incident Management team, comprised of members from the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, States of Idaho, Nevada and Utah, US Fish and Wildlife Service, and the cities of Reno and Carson City, Nevada, will be turning over management of the Yolla Bolly Complex to an incident management team from Alaska on Tuesday.

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