

OREGON'S "RED HATS"

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The constant and prompt availability of "snap" crews is most important in the use of a crew like the Red Hats. The author's description of a cooperative approach to the problem indicates how the 40-man crew principle may be adapted to varying administrative conditions.

During the summer of 1940 the school of Forestry at Oregon State College instituted a program for organization and training of forest fire-suppression crews. Cosponsors included the National Youth Administration, States Forester, United States Forest Service, Oregon Forest Fire Association, and others vitally interested in the protection of Oregon's forest wealth. The objectives of the program were:

1. Furnishing the State of Oregon with an efficient fire organization for call in handling emergency fire situations.
2. Training of forest-fire overhead
3. Furthering the forestry education of participants.
4. Providing deserving students with a means of earning money for school attendance.

Based at a camp on the McDonald State Forest 7 miles from the Forestry School in Corvallis, the crews participated in a unique training program. Two hours of study, 2 hours of training, and 4 hours of hard work on approved N.Y.A. projects constituted the day's schedule. Study included a wide range of practical forestry subjects such as first aid, use of the compass, tree and shrub identification, knot tying, and life saving. Among other things training consisted of and long hard hikes over the rough topography of McDonald Forest. Among the work projects were the following: Road and trail construction, road and trail maintenance, thinning of forest stands, pruning of forest stands, soil erosion control, white pine blister rust control, and snag felling.

During recreation hours some of the men went swimming in the nearby lake, others played games or passed the time by reading the material furnished by parents and well-wishers. Leave from camp was allowed, but not more than 10 percent of the camp strength was granted leave at any one time. Those who were fortunate enough to be on leave went skating at the nearby roller rink or enjoyed a show in town.

Having advertised themselves as ready to report to a forest fire at a moment's notice, the Red Hats were necessarily very highly organized. The basic unit was a squad of 4 men and a straw boss. One of the straw bosses in each group of 10 was the ranking officer, and a foreman was assigned to each crew of 25. Equipped with pick-ups, trucks, and three 25-man busses the camp had ample transportation. Hand tools and mess equipment were packed ready to go at any time. When a fire call came in, the supervisor designated the responsible officer; drivers slipped behind the wheels of the trucks; men who had practiced the procedure beforehand slid tool caches into pick-ups; straw bosses checked off their squads; bed rolls were stacked in the rear end of busses and the men loaded in, caulked boots in hand.

On the fire line the crews worked as originally organized or expanded by absorbing civilian fire fighters into their squads. On at least two large fires assistant foremen were detached from their squads and given civilian crews to supervise. Orders were that an assistant be trained for all overhead positions so that supervision would always be available. Since the training program provided timekeepers, torch men truck drivers, cooks, scouts, and other workmen, members of the crews were often used to facilitate the handling of pick-up labor assigned to him. If such substitution was impractical, however, the crew proceeded with control of operations as best it could.

The Red Hat crews were trained in the progressive method of fire-line construction. They did not, however, confine themselves to this operation alone, but burned out their line and mopped-up the area after backfiring operations. Then men were assigned positions because of aptitude shown in training and practiced the duties of those positions in order that the need for supervision in emergency situations might be minimized.

While on fire-suppression detail the men were paid a minimum of 40 cents an hour plus their expenses, the overhead jobs paying more according to their importance. Agreement on the wage scale was reached with the forest-protective agencies in the area before the fire season. The agencies all seemed pleased with the results and their average daily earnings of \$5.48 also proved satisfactory to the fire fighters.

While participating in the base camp training and N.Y.A. work program, the men were only allowed \$1 per day, but since this amount covered expenses, it did make it possible to train and organize the crews in readiness for fire duty. The resulting total average earning (fire fighting and N.Y.A.) was \$120 per man above expenses for an average enrollment period of 52.71 days. In addition, 24 men were placed in summer jobs with the forest-protective agencies. The average income per man on these positions was approximately \$100 a month plus expenses.

The program enrolled a total of 113 men. The largest number enrolled at one time was 87. Three 26-man crews were active during the peak of fire season, and 2 such crews were available for practically the entire 4 months (June 1 to October 1).

The camp was initiated for the benefit of first-year students in forestry who were unable to obtain other employment. Because of an abundance of summer jobs last year, all except a small number of the foresters were placed in positions before the fire season opened, and the camp was thrown open, therefore, to any young man in need of employment who was physically fit and wished training in the forestry field. Men were enrolled from almost all of the institutions of higher education in Oregon. College men from at least six other States took part and older high-school students proved very good material.

Popularity for the training program is indicated by the fact that, although plans for the summer of 1941 are at this time very incomplete, applications are already on hand from several States showing the interest of young men who have heard of the organization but did not take part in 1940. With a strong force of veterans returning and with the probability of a guarantee of minimum earnings in prospect, it would seem that Oregon's Red Hats have proved their value and established the program as a permanent institution.