All Hands on Deck!

Miller Timber Services and Wildland Firefighting Crews

By Lindsay Mohlere

When fire season starts, it’s all hands on deck for the wildland firefighting crews at Miller Timber Services Inc. Located in Philomath, Oregon, Miller Timber Services is one of a few logging companies in the Northwest that deploys multiple wildland fire fighting crews throughout the U.S.

Founded by Lee Miller in 1981, Miller Timber Services began as a reforestation operation and has grown to be one of the largest, most diverse timber services companies in the Northwest. Currently, Miller Timber Services and its sister company, L & B Reforestation Inc., provide a wide array of services including logging, cut-to-length thinning, reforestation, fuels management, and wildland firefighting.

Called to Action

In 1986, the State of Oregon needed help fighting forest fires and called upon reforestation contractors to assist in their efforts. Because of the experience gained doing slash burning in conjunction with reforestation projects, Miller had the personnel to fight fires and the equipment to handle the job. This led to the company becoming one of the first logging operations to contract with the state to provide fire labor crews.

Prior to enlisting private companies to fight fires, the state would query logging companies for individuals with fire experience. Those people would be hired directly by the state and covered by the state’s benefits policies including worker’s compensation.

This practice soon became too expensive. The final straw was when a National Guard unit returned from a fire with over thirty percent of its members injured. They were all covered under the state’s worker’s comp, which was hugely expensive.

“The worker’s comp cost the state more money than the labor crews. That’s when they realized it was easier to hire contractors because we had everything in place. The first year there were five contract crews signed up,” Miller says. “We were one of the originals, and we’ve been fighting fires ever since.”

Currently, Miller’s fire fighting division has multiple wildland fire suppression crews available for initial attack, fire suppression, mop-up, stand-by preparedness, and all-hazard incidents. The company also has a diverse fleet of wildland engines ranging from Type 4 engines with 1000 gal. water tanks to multiple Type 6 engines with 200-250 gal. capacity. Tenders and tactical tenders are available to deliver 3200 gallons of water for suppression activities. The Miller team can provide strike team leaders with overhead experience to manage and coordinate efficient use of resources. Additionally, single fallers and faller modules can be rapidly deployed to incidents requiring hazardous tree falling and snag removal.

Hands-On Training Counts

It’s no secret fighting wildland fires is a tough, often dangerous job, not suited for the faint of heart. The work is physically hard and intense. At Miller Timber Services, the physical fitness and training requirements are as rigorous as the job at hand.
The first step in the process for new firefighters is an orientation session that covers the basics of the job, fitness requirements, and training agenda. The company’s standard operating procedures, drug-free workplace policy, and wildland fire suppression program code of ethics are also discussed.

At that point, the applicants who return the next day must pass the physical fitness test to continue the 40-hour training course. Heidi Cleveland, Miller’s fire operations manager, explained that the company goes over and above regular fitness guidelines. “The physical fitness test is competitive and used as a baseline for evaluating individual fitness levels for field deployment readiness. It consists of a three-mile hike with a 45-pound pack done in under 45 minutes, a minute of push-ups, and a minute of sit-ups. Similar to a hotshot crew, we also add a mile and a half run,” she says.

Applicants who have passed the physical fitness test return to the classroom and begin the 40-hour training academy. The course work will prepare them to qualify for the National Wildfire Coordinating Group certifications necessary to become a wildland firefighter.

The first course is the S-190 Introduction to Wildland Fire Behavior. This course covers the basic factors of fire behavior, fuel types, and other conditions such as terrain and how wind affects fire. “We simulate fire behavior with a metal fire table, adjusting the table to show how the fire reacts to different fuel types, uphill, and downhill. We use a blow dryer to simulate wind. This visual simulation allows them to better grasp concepts and safety factors,” Cleveland added.

About mid-week the training moves into the S-130 Firefighter Training course.

Cleveland says they like to have candidates outside each day to use the hand tools, learn how to sharpen the tools, and actually perform the tasks they are learning.

“We have changed the course to be as “hands-on, real world” as possible. So when they are deployed on their first assignment, they feel comfortable. They’re prepared, and the supervisors know they understand what they will be required to do,” she added.

Two other certifications, the L-180 Human Factors in the Wildland Fire Service and I-100 Introduction to ICS (Incident Command System) are included within the standard course work.

Firefighters are also required by the NWCG PMS 310-1 to take the online independent study exam FEMA IS-700, a National Incident Management System (NIMS) course administered by FEMA. “Most of our firefighters, especially with our national crew agreement, can help with any all-hazard events. We can provide firefighting resources in response to natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina,” Cleveland says.

**The Operational Challenges**

Miller’s wildland firefighting division, like all businesses, has its own special challenges. According to Cleveland, one of the biggest tests they face is staffing.

“We have to hire a large number of folks, train them to our high standards, and set them up for success in a short period of time. We’ll influx 100 to 150 seasonal hires, and we have to on-board all of those folks in a six-month time period. Training is based on the calendar year, and we are quick to begin in January. From January 1 until the first fire dispatch of the season, you need to have everyone trained, certified, and ready for deployment in the field.” Cleveland says.
In addition, each firefighter needs the appropriate certifications and incident qualification card to be accepted on a fire. All crew fire records have to be updated and inspected.

“All of these steps must be completed prior to the first call out to make sure we have crews prepared at all times,” Cleveland adds.

Another ongoing challenge is keeping a “call when needed” pool available throughout the season. At the peak of fire season, the company has over 150 individuals on the fire line. However, they train between 200 and 250 firefighters to ensure they can mobilize a crew within two hours, 24-7. “We need extra personnel trained in order to effectively coordinate the mobilization of 20-person crews at any hour of the day,” Cleveland says.

Equipment and their operators are pulled from the company’s full-time logging operations and are posted to fires on an individual basis depending upon need and availability. It becomes a balancing act between the commitments of the company.

“It’s a fluid dynamic,” Cleveland says. “During fire season, it can change hour by hour.

In 2015, firefighting crews and equipment from Miller Timber Services fought some of the biggest fires in Oregon, Washington, Montana, California, and Alaska.

If you are interested in learning more about becoming a wildland firefighter, call Miller Timber Services, Inc. at (541) 929-2840.