

Public & Firefighter Safety on Large Fire Incidents

Amber Kamps, Lincoln District Ranger



If you attended any of the town meetings held during fire season 2003 you very likely heard a common theme. Hopefully you walked away knowing the high value fire managers place on your life as well as the lives of firefighters out on the line. Without question, preserving human life is the first priority in all fire suppression activities.

The Helena National Forest had four large fire incidents this season with over 1400 people, 60 pieces of equipment such as engines and dozers, and 12 aircraft assigned. Under unified command with County Sheriffs' Offices, over 200 residences and commercial businesses were evacuated.

Despite the large number of people involved, the complexity of the fires, and the extreme fire behavior that was experienced, there were no fatalities or serious injuries to either citizens or firefighters. That is worth saying again—there were no fatalities and no serious injuries! With over 80 people assigned, the Sheep Complex had only one minor injury reported. With over 400 people assigned, the Jimtown fire

had 6 minor injuries reported and one vehicle accident. The Lincoln Complex (Snow Talon and Moose Wasson Fires) had over 1000 people assigned, with 26 minor injuries reported and two vehicle accidents. Minor injuries included: sprained ankle, minor cuts, blisters, foot problems, and bee stings.

To summarize the 2003 fire season, the Helena National Forest had a total of 34 minor injuries, no major injuries, and 3 vehicle accidents. Most important, given the often hazardous conditions associated with firefighting, there were no fatalities. The minor injuries rate was 2% of the total personnel assigned. Approximately 450,000 hours of work were completed on these large fire incidents.

This is a tremendous accomplishment and the Helena National Forest does not share in it alone. The fires of 2003 brought a variety of people together, from local equipment operators to fire personnel from multiple and nationwide agencies, all working as a team on the Helena National Forest. Every

individual at every level of the fire organization is responsible for safety. This responsibility rests on those digging fireline, division supervisors, dozer operators, aircraft pilots, incident commanders, and agency administrators. Safety is a shared responsibility as diverse individuals work together as a team and entrust others with their lives. This trust and teamwork crosses boundaries and jurisdictions and is quite simply awesome when seen in action.

I think our shared accomplishment is a result of relying on personal responsibility for safety and also of the professional expectations of fire managers and leaders, who have set the highest standard of safety awareness. Looking back on the season I remember how each and every decision on strategies and tactics were looked at from a safety point of view. At a fire meeting Lewis & Clark County Sheriff Cheryl Liedle said, "The only thing that matters is that we don't get anybody hurt". In a memo dated August 19th after the Lincoln Complex blew up from 8092 acres to 23,054 acres in a 24 hour period, Helena National Forest Supervisor Tom Clifford stated, "Let me emphasize above all else, though, that our primary job is safety – of our employees and of the public. When the fire season of 2003 is behind us, I will judge success not by the number of acres we protected, but by the safe return of each and every one of you!"

On behalf of the Helena National Forest I would like to thank all of our cooperators in our shared commitment to this highest standard of safety first—every fire—every time.

Employees Participate in Helena's Festival of Trees

Sandy Berg,
Administrative Assistant



Helena National Forest employees take a deep interest in all kinds of trees. In fact, they used a different kind of expertise than usually called for in their jobs while creating a tree for the Intermountain Children's Home Festival of Trees this past December. This is the third year that the Forest has participated in the Festival of Trees, and each year brings fresh ideas for a new and exciting tree. The theme of the tree this year was "Our Forest Stars" and showcased tin and leather ornaments of animals found on the Helena National Forest, all homemade by talented Forest Service employees. The tree was topped by a lighted star that showed Ursa Major, a.k.a. The Great Bear, a.k.a. The Big Dipper. While the tree showcased our four-legged Forest stars, we consider our two-legged Forest stars to be those employees who donated time and dollars to benefit one of the worthy organizations of our community and surrounding area.