Podcast

Hi, this is Ken Frederick at the National Interagency Fire Center.

I recently had the privilege of spending a day with the Vegas Valley Hand Crew. I met the crew on a thinning project south of Ely, Nevada. Not too long ago, these firefighters were preparing to re-enter civilian life after their military enlistments were up. Now, they function as a top-notch group of firefighters.

This crew is one of three military veteran hand crews the Bureau of Land Management started this year. The BLM launched 20-person veteran hand crews in Las Vegas, NV, Klamath Falls, OR, and Sacramento, CA[[1]](#footnote-1), as a way of scratching two itches at once. The BLM wants to fill fire crews with men and women who are disciplined, physically fit, and team focused. Military veterans typically fit these requirements to a tee.

On the other hand, recent-era military veterans are looking for job opportunities that will help them transition into new careers. Many veterans like what wildland firefighting offers—the chance to work outdoors; the chance to travel to some of America’s spectacular backcountry areas; and the opportunity to make a real difference on the land. They also appreciate the esprit d ’corps found on fire crews—the same kind of esprit d ‘corps they saw in the military.

This program started last spring when the Southern Nevada District Office had a vision for hosting a veteran’s hand crew. The staff literally started the effort from the ground up. They quickly moved to recruit, hire, outfit and train this crew.

The crew superintendent, Eric Ellison, was detailed in from the Silver State Hotshots, and the assistant superintendent, Porter McQueary, detailed from the Alaska Smokejumpers. Ellison and McQueary hit the ground running. They procured the necessary personal protective equipment a fire crew needs—as well as tools and other supplies. Then they sketched out a training plan to transform the new crew from rookies to physically fit and skilled firefighters. The transportation question was answered when the Arizona Strip District offered to loan Nevada a couple of crew buggies.

The Vegas Valley Hand Crew has been a genuine success. This crew has had 11 fire assignments to date. In between fires, they’ve taken on several projects around the State of Nevada. They have a great safety attitude, which has resulted in a great safety record.

But most importantly, the BLM’s veteran hand crews are giving dozens of veterans who have served our country a foothold into a new career. While fighting fire isn’t everyone’s cup of tea, many of these veterans are finding themselves having the time of their lives. The BLM will benefit from their talents and enthusiasm for many years.

For more information on the BLM’s veteran fire crews, contact BLM Fire and Aviation at (208) 387-5457. Thanks for listening.

1. The BLM also stood up ten-person veteran hand crews in Medford, OR and Spokane, WA in 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)