



COVID ‘Shots:

Hotshot Superintendents Reflect on the COVID Fire Year of 2020

Emily Haire

Almost half of all Americans (45 percent) reported that their lives were affected a lot by COVID-19 pandemic conditions in 2020 and experienced a lot of worry and stress on a daily basis (Gallup, Inc. 2021). Nevertheless, even more said that they thrived. The study of human populations is rife with such paradoxes, especially during moments of change, when habits are shaken but values are clarified. Even in relatively uniform social groups, the same event can spur a wide variety of responses.

In June 2021, Interagency Hotshot Crew (IHC) Superintendents Jerry Hoffman (Midewin IHC), Devin Parks (Zigzag IHC), and Matt Prentiss (Wyoming IHC) discussed their experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic, its significance as a moment of change, the challenge of moving on in 2021, and what comes after that. They often had very different insights about work/

life balance, operational and cultural adjustments, how crisis enhanced their values, and the coalescence of fire behavior and firefighter labor. Their insights, lightly edited for readability, appear below following each question asked during the interviews.

A DELINEATION

The pandemic of 2020 was a watershed event in global history. Does 2020 mark a clear “before-COVID” and “after-COVID” moment for you, whether in your work life or your personal life?

Matt Prentiss (Wyoming IHC):

The first few months of COVID, when things were really locked down—that was very bizarre and challenging and stressful. Those first 3 months were pretty demanding on us as parents, when we were fully teleworking, and also demanding on the kids to figure out how to navigate school on an online

Before the pandemic, the maskless Zigzag Interagency Hotshot Crew poses at a barbecue held for former crewmembers in 2019. For some, the arrival of COVID was just another example of incorporating a new type of risk into an already dangerous job in a dynamic environment. As the risks mount in the wildland fire environment, the Zigzag crewmembers are preparing to fight, as Superintendent Devin Parks puts it, “whatever today’s fire is.” Photo: Zigzag Interagency Hotshot Crew, USDA Forest Service.

Emily Haire is a research assistant for the Forest Service, Human Dimensions Program, Rocky Mountain Research Station, Fort Collins, CO.

NOTE: The views expressed in this article are those of the interviewees and do not necessarily represent the views of the USDA Forest Service.

platform. Trying to figure out how to have the personal space to do what we needed to do was extremely challenging, especially with the kids. At first, the kids thought it was great, and then they realized they were missing out on the social aspect of school, plus trying to figure out how to get their schoolwork done. COVID definitely impacted my normal day-to-day personal life more than my work life.

Jerry Hoffman (Midewin IHC):

It was very distinct in early February of 2020. Back then, we knew something was going on, but COVID hadn't really taken hold in the United States yet. To me, it seemed like nobody really knew how bad it was going to be. My girlfriend and I were sitting on a plane. She had an aisle seat, and across the aisle from her was a woman who had a mask on, who was eating a sandwich with gloves on—no exposed skin at all, basically. And we were thinking, “She is taking this way-way seriously.” A month later, the whole country was like that.

My crew hit the road the first week of March and headed to the Mark Twain National Forest in Missouri, for both initial attack and prescribed fire, which is what we typically do. Everything was absolutely, perfectly normal. But we knew at that point: COVID is in the country, it is spreading, and it may highly impact us.

Then that trip was cut short. The agency made a decision to cut us loose to get out of there and get home. The agency was busy trying to figure out what 2020 was even going to look like and how we were going to function.

We ended up sitting for 6 weeks, because there was no more prescribed fire at that point. That really impacted the operations of the crew, impacted getting prescribed fires done, keeping burn units on cycles. For our crew, it really, really identified how much our crew relies on prescribed fire to keep busy. We are easily one of the busiest crews in the country, but we need to do a lot of prescribed fire for that to happen in the Eastern Region.

Devin Parks (Zigzag IHC):

I couldn't say 100 percent that it is going to be that certain, with large pre-COVID and post-COVID shifts in work, operations, life operations, and cultural operations. I couldn't say for sure that there's going to be that shift of “before” and “after,” as starkly as you were asking. Part of that is: we're still right there. It's like trying to comment on something being the biggest ever while you're still at the concert. I wouldn't say it's no big deal. It obviously had a huge impact on a lot of different things.

Within fire [the fire organization], there were some adjustments that were made in 2020—some of them really, really good breakthrough adjustments to manage fire both logistically and administratively. Some of the good ones are being carried forward, and we might've actually backed off some of the other good ones. I hope we come through with a little bit of a balance.



The Midewin Interagency Hotshot Crew in action. Prescribed fire operations were disrupted due to concerns about smoke impacts on respiratory health during COVID. In March 2020, the crew was called off of the Mark Twain National Forest during its first assignment of the year, making crewmembers realize how much they relied on prescribed burning as part of their work. Photo: USDA Forest Service.

OPERATIONAL AND CULTURAL CHANGES

Comparing 2020 to previous fire years, what aspects of your work have changed because of COVID?

Matt Prentiss (Wyoming IHC):

We were asked to be more self-sufficient in 2020, and that was definitely different. Our goal when we sat down in the spring of 2020 was to make sure that we were self-sufficient and could take care of the crew better than we ever had before. It was about, “How can we make this our own and really take care of the crew?”

That’s when the [kitchen] trailer was born. To be completely self-sufficient with our food program was beneficial to the crew, not just eating MREs [meals ready to eat] or junk food the entire time. We wanted to eat better than we ever had on a fire, and we took care of the crew that way.

At the same time, it would not affect us on an operational level: it would not affect the way we fought fire and how we operated on a typical shift. We had to keep our operational tempo the same and not compromise that. And I feel like we accomplished that last year. It was more just taking care of the crew without the logistical support of a Fire Op Team.

We were able to be more operational; we had more time out on the fire to do our job. Prior to 2020, typically the fires that we would go to were large fires which would have a team [incident management team] on them, and there would be a large fire camp. We would usually have to travel longer distances, up to an hour’s drive just to get out to the fire to work and then back to camp.

Once the 2020 season started and we were actually more self-sufficient, we could be closer to the fire, so we had less travel time and spent more time doing fire operations. We also didn’t have to worry about the longer briefings in camp. We just got the information we needed for the day so we could be operational and safe, and we just went out to the fireline and got the job done.

Our goal when we sat down in the spring of 2020 was to make sure that we were self-sufficient and could take care of the crew better than we ever had before.

There were times in the past where we were in the middle of an operation—a firing operation or critical piece of line that we needed to put in—but we were pulled off the line because we needed to get back into camp because of logistical constraints, the caterer, or whatever it was.

In 2020, that wasn’t the issue. We handled all of our own logistics, so that wouldn’t dictate how we operated out on the fireline. We could just focus on our job more. That was pretty consistent throughout the fire season. There was never a time that logistics overran the fireline operation.

We could also work a little later in the evening because we were not dependent on catering services. We ate healthier because that was our goal, to provide highly nutritious food to the crew. The crew never got sick last year; we never had camp crud. And we were very fortunate that no one on the crew got COVID during our season.

Jerry Hoffman (Midewin IHC):

We used to all get together in a conference room, sitting right next to each other during the daily briefing. Since 2020, we do daily briefings differently—not getting together, done by conference call. Everybody separated, nobody in the same kind of room. When certain groups are together, we get together in an outside setting. So that’s actually becoming very, very normal now, which is very different than what it used to be. It has become so normal that it works. A year ago, it wasn’t very clean; we didn’t feel like we were getting the information. But now everybody’s so used to it, that we figured it out and it’s working.

Last year, we would ask—actually pre-establish with people as we were traveling again last year—what their comfort zone

was when making a game plan for a fire. I absolutely respect their comfort zone, and we’d figure it out somehow. Prior to COVID, that was never a question that you would ask somebody. Some people just are not comfortable being in close quarters—they don’t like shaking hands or they don’t like being close to people they don’t know. But it was never anything that was asked. And now, it kind of is. I think it’s more respectful to people, you know, just rather than assuming that they’re good with you being next to them. Asking shows that you have respect for that person and their personal space.

Devin Parks (Zigzag IHC):

Some of the remote things that were implemented last year—the remote check-in; using online tools; remotely submitting times; and a more remote demob [demobilization] process, as opposed to walking into a building or a tent with a piece of paper—that was a big change. The main briefing being over the radio or, at small scale, having well-spaced breakout briefings for each division—these resembled some things we had done in the past but not to the scale that we did it in 2020. It was fairly standard across the landscape.

Some of the beneficial changes were done in order to have less exposure to each person.

One of the outcomes that we had from that was measurably better sleep because we were sleeping in better locations, not brought into a centralized camp-type location. We were getting the food that we were getting—but we always get the food that we were getting—but we picked up food and drove it to our remote sleeping location, whether it was hotels or spiking in remote locations or using campgrounds near fires to have more spacing.

One noticeable detrimental change was less time speaking with people. It means less connection, less knowing of people, less networking. There was less personal interaction, like up-close personal interaction.

Prior to 2020, in a morning briefing, people walked up to each other and had little mini conversations, little bite-sized conversations. And we'd have several of those, both touching base with people that we know through the years in the fire organization, as well as going to touch base with someone from a different type of resource about something. But each of those connections then leads to knowing each other in the future and a closer network of fire responders.

Last year was much more separated—intentionally separated. Didn't sleep in the same vicinity, didn't eat in the same facilities, didn't have breakfast conversations with other fire resources. Didn't have very much [opportunity] for the prebriefing conversations, which is part of the way we do an ICP [incident command post], with a briefing area and people coming into the briefing area a little bit earlier and having conversations. So, a lot of those pieces didn't occur—I would say in multiresource AARs [after-action reviews] weren't a common occurrence. And if it was, it was because of something fairly major.

Some of those pieces, I would say, have some effect. I have been part of incidents where there have been different sorts of interactions, less-than-positive interactions, that needed to be worked through and discussed later among people from different resources. Whether it was additional stress from the last year-and-a-half that everybody lived through or very isolated to those specific incidences, but those incidents have given us something to pay attention to—something that may need to be addressed or worked through, as people are back to sharing the same space and having more interaction face to face.

CONSISTENCY DESPITE COVID

What has not changed in how you work? What has been consistent regardless of 2020 COVID issues?

Matt Prentiss (Wyoming IHC):

The fire environment. I always say, "Fires don't care about COVID." As far as being out on the fireline doing our job, none of that changed. Fire dictated a lot of what we did, and that hasn't changed from previous years. Yeah. Once we got out on the line, that felt very similar. That's why I say my work life didn't really get impacted too much by COVID, versus my personal life, which really got impacted. Fighting fire didn't feel that much different, operationally. Logistically it did, but operationally it felt very, very much the same.

Jerry Hoffman (Midewin IHC):

Effectively communicating, throwing a map on the hood of the truck and coming up with a game plan for a fire was very, very difficult to do when standing 6 or 10 feet away from each other or just by phone. We tried it and it just was not successful, in my opinion.

The vast majority of people were like, "Yep, absolutely. If something's going on, we have to be working in close quarters together." I'd much rather be shoulder to shoulder with somebody, looking at something on the hood of a truck or a tablet and say, "Here's what we need to do." So we continued with that.

Devin Parks (Zigzag IHC):

So far in 2021, the experiences that we've had are back to the previous model in a lot of ways. There is much more of a return to the social interactions now and much more face-to-face contact with people. Briefings are in the same format that they were prior to 2020, is what we've been experiencing. There have been a few pieces with more access, whether remotely submitting our CTRs [crew time reports] and the more remote demob process. But a lot of the interactions that we have with other prior resources—they resemble what they were prior to the 2020 year.

Fires don't care about COVID. As far as being out on the fireline doing our job, none of that changed.

COMPARATIVE MOMENTS OF CHANGE

Are there other significant moments—moments unrelated to COVID—that you consider times of major change that marked a clear "before-and-after" transition in your life and work?

Matt Prentiss (Wyoming IHC):

My career has been primarily hotshotting. And trying to have that work/life balance has been challenging. This job is very demanding; it takes me away from home; and my personal life coincides with that.

Sometimes, there's crossroads where things happen, whether it be the birth of my kids, struggles in relationships, you know—death of parents. All those things kind of intertwine at times; it's not very clean. Those things cross paths, and not so much the positive way. It can be a very challenging time.

I've definitely struggled with things that happen at work and things that happen at home and those things colliding. Trying to not let them affect one another is very challenging, in the role that I play as the superintendent or the role that I play at home as husband and father. Fire in general is very similar to the military in that way, where this job really impacts your personal life. The things that we have to deal with definitely have conflicts with things that are going on at home. Wearing two different hats at times is difficult.

Being a superintendent, you have 20 people that you're in charge of 24 hours a day while you're out on assignment. You're having to manage things that are happening on the fireline, but also you're there to support crewmembers' personal lives.

Then you come home, and you have to put that stuff aside and help focus on what's going on at home and be there for them too. So, it's just a very unique balance. And sometimes it's hard to take off that superintendent hat and adjust to home life. Being gone impacts the family at home; and the things that they're having to deal with while you're gone, you're not there to help with. When you come back home, you have to try to integrate into their lives. I can't think of any other job except maybe the military or law enforcement where you have to wear these two different hats and try to balance that.

Jerry Hoffman (Midewin IHC):

We were a crew that did drink while we were on travel status. It would depend on a situation; like if we had a good shift, we would let somebody have a beer with dinner. Nothing crazy. If we were done with the fire assignment, while traveling back, we would—depending on where we were and what was going on—let the crew let it rip a little bit. And that was fun, but it definitely created a lot of headaches.

In 2004, we had a fatality on our crew. We were coming back from Florida. It was an after-hours death in which one of our crew members was struck by a vehicle and killed.

We were shut down after that. We had to really, really rework the program and what's important to us. After the fatality, we went to completely dry on the road. Portal to portal, we do not drink. We really, really stress that. We owe the country and we owe the taxpayers: being professional firefighters on the road, and that's all we are. Be professional at all times.

So that was a big, big change. I've been part of leadership of the crew, before and since then. Workwise, that was definitely a really big change. I take the responsibility of being a professional firefighter for the country seriously.

On the personal side is: failed relationship, after failed relationship, after failed relationship, broken heart, broken heart, broken heart.

A hot topic right now across the country is work/life balance. My work/life balance was completely outta whack. I was a workaholic. It was crew first, no matter what. Missing important events because it was fire season and that's all that mattered. And so, personal relationships were failing.

And after my last failed relationship, I was like, "Okay, I'm done with this, it's time to change things." Now I'm successfully 3-plus years into a great relationship. We recently got engaged. I'm extremely excited to spend the rest of my life with her. That's because I finally found that balance.

Devin Parks (Zigzag IHC):

There was an event that comes to mind. Prior to this, there was a mentality that fires would hit an old burn scar and would then stop progressing and would become an opportunity maybe to pick the fire up or use it to suppress or slow down a fire growth.

But in 2017, I believe it was, I was on a fire that hit an old burn scar and burned across the old burn scar, which was standing snags—heavy dead and down [trees] and brush—and burned across it for a long way, at a fairly rapid rate for the local fuel type. It was a fairly rapid-burning large fire across an old burn scar, and it didn't slow it down at all. Until that happened, burn scars were thought to set you up for success. But this didn't.

We're having to make up new terms to describe the extreme events we're living through.

I am sitting in under a "heat dome" right now with temperatures so far beyond anything ever measured that, um, I hope there's a lot of alarm about those kinds of differences. We're having, right now in June [2021] in the

Northwest, the hottest temperatures ever measured. That sounds bad if it's a single event, right?

In March [2021], I was in Alabama and Tennessee and went through what they were calling at the time "historic" tornadoes through the area. That was pretty rough. That was pretty bad. Five months before that, we had a "historic" wind event in the Northwest, with unheard of fire growth for the Northwest—incredibly destructive, tragic fires all over the Northwest. And what was it a year earlier? We had a "historic" fire season in Australia.

In no way am I diminishing these events. I keep saying "historic" because it's never been this bad. When we talk about a "heat dome," that's a 50- to 100- to 200-year heat dome. When we speak of "major change," is that something that we have another 100- to 200-year heat dome, 2 years from now? And when we have an additional wind event like the Northwest had within the next 10 years?

Then it stops being "historic." It just becomes what we're having. So there appear to be these extreme events escalating, and whether it's freezing events, historic snows—the events are bigger.

VALUES DURING TIMES OF CHANGE

Many hotshot crews have a social media presence where they post their status and photos, but also mission, history, or values. For example, the Wyoming IHC says it values camaraderie, a strong work ethic, and mutual respect. The Midewin IHC notes dependability, hard work, crew cohesion, pride, respect, diversity of ideas. The Zigzag IHC upholds a strong work ethic, great teamwork, and a commitment to safety.

I take the responsibility of being a professional firefighter for the country seriously.



The Midewin Interagency Hotshot Crew in action. Prescribed fire operations were disrupted due to concerns about smoke impacts on respiratory health during COVID. In March 2020, the crew was called off of the Mark Twain National Forest during its first assignment of the year, making crewmembers realize how much they relied on prescribed burning as part of their work. Photo: USDA Forest Service.

Did working through COVID change or challenge your crew's mission or values? What strengths did they draw on to get through 2020?

Matt Prentiss (Wyoming IHC):

I think it reinforced our mission and our values. I think the [kitchen] trailer brought us closer together in that team cohesion environment that we try to foster.

Looking before COVID and the way we operated out on the fireline, we'd be tight, and we'd work really close together. But when we were back at the traditional fire camp, we would go to the caterer, and once we went through the caterer, everybody kind of just went their separate ways and did their own thing.

The trailer kind of forced us to bond over a family-style meal, when at the end of the day, the family comes together and they all sit and eat dinner together.

Having the trailer forced us to work together outside of the fireline, to prepare this meal and gather around this meal and interact more than we had in the past. That reinforced all those values we try to foster in the crew—camaraderie, strong work ethic, mutual respect—which is really cool to see.

That was not expected to happen. Our thought was, "Hey, let's provide these really good meals to the crew and see how we function outside of the norm." We didn't really anticipate the camaraderie that would come from having the trailer and having to make this meal together for 20 people, and how it all came about. That was pretty cool. I think it definitely helped us with those values.

Jerry Hoffman (Midewin IHC):

I don't know that working through COVID really challenged our identity and values as a 'shot crew. I think it

enhanced everything. We didn't know what the 2020 fire season was even going to look like; we didn't know if we were going to get out at all. We're a crew that's pretty well used to getting a thousand hours of overtime. And people were a little bit worried about that because when overtime becomes the norm, you make life plans based on that. So we were very, very transparent with that kind of stuff. But we worked to all get through it and committed to working together to get through it.

We've also been a crew right from the start who believed this was going to be a team effort in decision making, from the squad leaders on up. We were going to be a five-person team that's going to make decisions together, if time allows. Like with COVID—this is something that none of us had experienced before. So we opened it up all the way down to the crewmembers. There's flexibility in that. We went down to Region 3; we

got everything figured out on how they were handling everything. Then we headed up to Oregon; start it over. We get up there and Region 6 is handling it differently than Region 3 or Region 9. Start over again.

So it was always just an extremely flexible thing, trying to be as patient as possible and not freaking out over all this change. But also having everybody on the crew have a voice and be able to say, “We got this, and this is how we’re going to do it. It’s going to be perfectly fine. It’s going to work.”

You run into people both young and old who are resistant to change. And they either got weeded out in 2020 because they couldn’t handle all the change; or they’ve had some life-changing events and now they can handle change. Because that’s how the past 18 months have been, just nothing but change on a daily basis.

Devin Parks (Zigzag IHC):

It was not just the COVID-related stress for the season, but it was also a long fire season. We had a busy fire season, as most resources did. That in itself had its own sort of level of stress.

Then piling that onto the other pieces of home stress, of society stress—being unable to go to the places they would like to go in their spare time, being unable to do some of the things that they would prefer to do in their spare time—puts everybody in a heightened level of stress. I observed that our crew treated each other well, treated each other respectfully, had a good season of firefighting, were busy, and were able to continue with the level of respect within the program to have a good season.

Also, from my level and interpretation of how people spoke to risk management, there was a lot of focus from a lot of levels on COVID, like suddenly COVID was the only threat to firefighters. That was 100 percent of the focus. A ton of effort went into COVID-specific mitigation, which is important but it’s just another risk. When we pile on all of the risks that hotshot crews and all modules experience in a season—

between the driving risk, the hazard tree mitigations, the flames on the fire, and the actual firefighting mitigations—there’s a lot of risk management that’s happening all day, every day.

There wasn’t very much messaging on the fact that, “Yes, COVID is an additional risk; have an appropriate response to it; put mitigations into place to lower the level of the risk.” Mitigations like personal spacing, washing our hands a lot, wearing masks when we’re in the presence of others, keeping personal space even though you’re wearing a mask, not having unnecessary contact with others, significantly increasing our cleaning of just surfaces—but you’re doing all of the mitigations that you can do at that point.

Continue those, but there’s still everything else. We definitely communicated a lot, in-house, about not losing sight of the fact that we have an incredibly dangerous job in a dynamic environment, where you don’t have all of the information. But you’re still taking on projects and working to develop the situation and accomplish the mission.

Situate COVID as an additional risk. Don’t have it as the only risk. Don’t lose sight of all the different variables. I tried to emphasize that because of all of the other hazards within our environment.

PANDEMIC CHALLENGES

What challenges, stress points, or fragilities did your crew experience during 2020?

Matt Prentiss (Wyoming IHC):

For the most part, in our work life we were really isolated from most other people. When we were out in the public, we were very conscious of our interactions with other folks and respected the public with mask wearing and social distancing. I think in public was where we felt stress the most.

Once we got to a fire, we set up our own camp, and we isolated ourselves from other people, which was really unique. There was not the social aspect of being in a fire camp and being around other people. We didn’t have that. And at

times that was challenging because all we had was each other to be around. There wasn’t that break from each other.

But—as far as COVID—the isolation really sheltered us from the stressors of COVID. COVID wasn’t a huge impact on our daily lives, at least our work lives.

Jerry Hoffman (Midewin IHC):

At the tail end of our season, I think cumulative fatigue with everything just caught up with us. Everybody was over it at that point. Everybody wanted to get home and be with done with fire and get COVID mitigation and try to just kind of like normalize a little bit.

But 2020 was a difficult and a long and busy fire season for us even after the initial sitting for 6 weeks. It was crazy, the amount of hours we ended up with, as much fire that we ended up on. I think the stress of all that change, operating differently, always having it in the back of your mind, wondering, “Are we going to get COVID going rampant through the crew? Are we going to quarantine for two weeks? Am I the reason that we’re looking at 2 more weeks of the crew not getting overtime? Am I asymptomatic, and am I going to bring it home to my loved ones?” I think that was constantly on our minds. That really, really contributed to mental fatigue by the end of the season, where everyone was just done with it and wanted to go home.

Also stressing the value of crew cohesion and teamwork was that pressure of days off. We were just asking people to keep the team in mind. Keep the crew in mind. Reminding them they have the responsibility now of continuing to use hand sanitizer, to wear masks and avoid situations that could potentially expose you and bring it back to the crew. It put a lot of responsibility on people, because I think no one wanted to be that individual that potentially brought it back to the crew and shut us down again.

Devin Parks (Zigzag IHC):

Obviously, there were challenges in that things were changed.

But within the crew, things operated much closer to normal—as far as interactions, procedures, processes that we follow, in how we communicate with each other or timing of how the day unfolds for us most of the time through a fire season. A lot of those things were the continuation to prior seasons.

Then we had to make our adjustments in that we weren't going to locations where we were exposed to other people. We were doing more things just within the crew's footprint, without very much interaction with others.

FORECASTING CHANGE

Moving forward, if you had to forecast the next big moment of crisis or change, positive or negative, what do you see?

Matt Prentiss (Wyoming IHC):

I'll focus on what I'm comfortable with, and that would be the Fire and Aviation [Management] side of things.

I would say there's probably going to be, in the next few years, real challenges in the Forest Service when it comes to hiring and retention. We're already seeing some of the effects of that right now in 2021. I believe there's 25 or 30 type 1 crews that weren't able to keep their hotshot status because of hiring issues and retention issues. I don't see that going away. And I believe it's going to probably get worse before it gets better.

There have to be some changes in the hiring process and a real need to look at addressing the retention issue in the Forest Service, on the fire side of things. It's going to really impact the fire operations side of things when there's a lack of resources. So I think that's going to be a huge issue moving forward in the next several years.

In the hotshot group, they definitely recognize there's a problem. There are a few folks speaking out about it to raise awareness of this issue, of the struggles that crews are having with the retention problems. I think that needs to continue—continue to build our awareness and really look at why this is happening and why we're having these issues with our hiring and retention.

Jerry Hoffman (Midewin IHC):

I think we're in the middle of the next crisis right now, with this hot topic of our huge salary and retention and morale issues. The Forest Service is by far the most looked-upon agency when it comes to wildland firefighting, and our retention issue is horrible. We are so short-handed right now. I really feel like we're going to have a difficult time maintaining the seasonal work force.

So many people are not raised in the outdoors or even raised with a hard-working work ethic. We are going to be short-handed for years and years to come when it's so much easier for somebody to do something and make more money. When California can use the State budget to devote \$2 billion to improving their wildland firefighting agency and they're looking to hire 1,400 more people, those 1,400 people are going to come from the Forest Service, maybe the BLM [Bureau of Land Management].

It has a lot to do with hotshot crews, but I think it's fire in general. Last year, we increased our crew to 14 career positions. So now we have nine GS-5 positions on the crew, and we can't keep them filled. It's easier for people to resign and go do something else than it is to maintain the career. They can go make more money doing something else and not have to be away from loved ones for 6 months out of the year.

Devin Parks (Zigzag IHC):

Oh, man, I definitely don't want to be a forecaster of crisis. An AFMO [assistant fire management officer] that I worked with, that I had both respect and really like, recently said, "I'm sick of living through historic events." He said that very recently. And I think, if anything, my forecast is probably the continued historic events that negatively impact the fire environment.

One thing has come up multiple times already this year is, "I can't believe it's burning like this in June" type of talk. Or, "I can't believe it's burning like this in May" when it is more like it would burn in July or August. We've been trying to communicate, when

that comes up, that it's no longer the season that it was early in our career. May isn't the same as May was 10 years ago, 15 years ago, 20 years ago. To fight today's fire—under the fuel conditions, the weather conditions, and the fire behavior conditions—regardless of what the month is. So, we're trying to speak to that, to not be surprised if a fire exhibits extreme fire behavior. Because they are, and they do, and they're going to. No matter what month we're in, be prepared to fight whatever today's fire is.

Wildland firefighters and hotshot crews are traveling to fires in these "historic" events. These events have a large effect on both the personnel as well as the fires on the ground. In my mind, the COVID mitigations were no way easy. But we don't have mitigations put in place for "historic" weather events and "historic" fires, currently. So that would be one of the pieces that I would say is a major, major change and something to look back on.

And at the same time, there are cracks in the national fire response. We're working through trip wires or hurdles with organizational capacities and staffing issues—at the same time as "historic" events. Maybe our response capacity and the need to respond may be heading in different directions, when we need to be able to have a more robust sort of fire response at the same time. Is this becoming more difficult in the staffing and organizational structure? This could potentially be another non-COVID major, major change. And it's not like having a single event, it's not an earthquake. It feels like more of an escalating situation.

LITERATURE CITED

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