



# USDA Forest Service Fire and Aviation Management Briefing Paper

Date November 10, 2008

**Topic: Porterville Organized Crews**

## **History:**

- The Porterville organized fire crews have been in existence since 1925. In the early years, people of many ethnic backgrounds were represented on the Porterville crews. Today, the crews are dominated by people of Mexican and Mexican-American decent. It wasn't until the late 1950's when crew bosses were used by the Forest Service (FS). It was common practice for the crew bosses to hand pick their fire crew from the 500 individuals waiting outside the Porterville Forest Service warehouse.
- In the 1970's the Porterville crews developed their own dress code and started buying high quality professional fire line gear. Today, they are referred to as the Porterville Organized Crews (OC), comprised of 375 administratively determined (AD) personnel divided into three sectors; the Scorpions, Cobras, and Black Eagles, whose ranks include firefighters ranging in age from 18 to over 65 years. These sectors usually mean 15 crews can be established.

## **Current Situation:**

- Over the last 70 years, the biggest changes focused on firefighter safety, training, and transportation. Firefighter safety may best be displayed by looking at the number of hours the OC personnel work, divided by the number of OC personnel injuries and vehicle accidents which are comparable, and, in some analysis, lower than our regular FS workforce. We have increased the number of fire training classes to achieve our goal of moving all of our Type 2 crews into Type 2 initial attack (IA) configuration, which requires three-qualified squad boss/incident commanders (Type 5) on each crew. To transport our crews, we use five, 4x4, rental six-pack vehicles. The cost is one-third compared to the cost of the buses we used until 2004. The move from buses also meets the Type 2 IA requirement to split the crew into smaller modules.
- The Regional Office provides the Sequoia with WFPR funding for the OC program at \$75,000. We are able to use the Regional WFSU job code to cover up to 80 hours of training for the AD OC employees. In addition to the 15 OC crews, we have two SQF Camp Crews that have twenty members including a receiving and distribution manager (RCDM) and fork lift operators.
- The OC program is managed by a GS-8 engine captain (\$75,000), GS-7 dispatcher (73,000) and a GS-6 assistant fire engine operator (AFEO) (\$55,000), and assisted by three STEP employees, based at the Porterville FS warehouse. In addition to the OC crews, this group manages the Porterville fire warehouse, which is able to initially support three Type 3 incidents and outfit 450 firefighters. Additional support is provided by: our forest budget officer Vicki Yarbrough GS-11 who needs and average of 350 hours (\$12,500) each year to review and forward the OC fire time slips to ASC. Our administrative operations specialist Wendy Russ GS-11 and her small staff need 225 hours (\$7,700), each year to process the OC hiring and medical paperwork. Wendy's staff also works an average of 160 hours (\$5,600) to sign-up OC crews for fire assignments.

- In the last four years, the OC program has mobilized crews for wildfires an average of 84 times each year; the majority of the mobilizations last fourteen days. Each year, on average, the OC crews earn \$3.5 million in firefighting salary. The majority of these OC employees reside in Tulare County, one of the poorest counties in California.
- Five of our 15 OC crews are experienced with resource benefit fire management practices. These crews have extensive experience using wilderness spike camp tactics and utilization of pack trains on the Sequoia, Inyo and Los Padres national forests. In 2007, our program provided training opportunities for agency personnel as crew bosses and crew representatives. That year 60 trainees were qualified as a direct result of working with our OC fire crews.
- We mobilized a “Chipper Crew Taskforce,” see photo, to the Day fire on the Los Padres National Forest in 2006.
- We have 120 government-licensed vehicle operators with towing qualifications on our organized crews. We have 180 Class A fallers, 65 Class B fallers and 25 Class C fallers. We currently have 140 government-owned chainsaws and 20 power pole saws available within the program.

**Future:**

- We are currently hiring organized crew members and others as temporary employees and/or STEP employees on an intermittent schedule. We are working with the Los Padres, Shasta-Trinity, Inyo, Humboldt-Toiyabe, Huron Manistee (Michigan) National Forests and the Department of Interior’s Bureau of Land Management and National Park Service who have requested crews from our program to accomplish work assignments, i.e., prescribed burning, hazardous fuels reduction, burned area emergency rehabilitation (BAER), and road brushing.
- We are working on agreements with several local colleges to start college fire crews, which we hope will be a great opportunity for women and minorities to begin a career with the Forest Service. It is our intent to use the STEP hiring authority to provide our employees with an opportunity to further their educational goals.
- We are building five more organized crews in FY09, bringing our total number to 20 crews of which six will be at the Type 2 IA status.
- With the increase in crews, our numbers will increase to 180 government-licensed vehicle operators with towing qualifications. We will have 280 Class A fallers, 95 Class B fallers, and 25 Class C fallers. We hope to purchase 200 additional chainsaws for a total 340 Government owned chainsaws and 20 power pole saws available within the program.

**Request:**

- We hope to secure \$420,000 in funding in FY09, or the near future, to purchase the above mentioned 200 chainsaws for \$140,000; five 16-inch chippers for \$125,000; fire line gear for the additional five organized crews \$85,000; and fire gear for two college crews for \$45,000 (the Bakersfield Knights and the Porterville Pirates); and one automatic chainsaw chain grinder for \$25,000.

**National Program status:**

- Lastly, we are exploring the possibility of having the Porterville OC Program host a National Academy for Crew Bosses similar to the Florida Rx Fire School. The goal is to utilize classroom and field assignments to address the national shortage of crew boss qualified agency personnel. The crew boss qualification is the cornerstone in developing personnel to move up into critical fire management positions.

**Key Points:**

- The Porterville organized fire crews have been in existence since 1925. In the early years, people of many ethnic backgrounds were represented on the Porterville crews. Today, the crews are dominated by people of Mexican and Mexican-American descent.
- The Porterville Organized Crews (OC), comprised of 375 administratively determined (AD) personnel divided into three sectors; the Scorpions, Cobras, and Black Eagles, whose ranks include firefighters ranging in age from 18 to over 65 years.
- Over the last 70 years, the biggest changes focused on firefighter safety, training, and transportation.
- The Regional Office provides the Sequoia with WFPR funding for the OC program at \$75,000.
- In the last four years, the OC program has mobilized crews for wildfires an average of 84 times each year; the majority of the mobilizations last fourteen days. Each year, on average, the OC crews earn \$3.5 million in firefighting salary. The majority of these OC employees reside in Tulare County, one of the poorest in California.
- We have 120 government-licensed vehicle operators with towing qualifications on our organized crews. We have 180 Class A fallers, 65 Class B fallers and 25 Class C fallers. We currently have 140 government-owned chainsaws and 20 power pole saws available within the program.
- We are currently hiring organized crew members and others as temporary employees and/or STEP employees on an intermittent schedule to accomplish work for the Los Padres, Shasta-Trinity, Inyo, Humboldt-Toiyabe, Huron Manistee (Michigan) National Forests and the Department of Interior's Bureau of Land Management and National Park Service.
- We are working on agreements with several local colleges to start college fire crews, which we hope will be a great opportunity for women and minorities to begin a career with the Forest Service. It is our intent to use the STEP hiring authority to provide our employees with an opportunity to further their educational goals.
- We are building five more organized crews in FY09, bringing our total number to 20 crews of which six will be at the Type 2 IA status.
- We are requesting \$420,000 in funding in FY09, or the near future, to purchase 200 chainsaws \$140,000; five 16-inch chippers for \$125,000; fire line gear for five additional organized crews \$85,000; and fire gear for two college crews for \$45,000 (the Bakersfield Knights and the Porterville Pirates); and one automatic chainsaw chain grinder for \$25,000.
- We are exploring the possibility of having the Porterville OC Program host a National Academy for Crew Bosses similar to the Florida Rx Fire School, to address the national shortage of crew boss qualified agency personnel.

If you have any questions about our Porterville Organized Crew Program, please contact Brent Skaggs, Forest Fire Chief, at (559) 784-1500, extension 1120 or by cell phone at (559) 280-1744.