



# NEWS RELEASE

Sequoia National Forest and the Giant Sequoia National Monument  
1839 S. Newcomb Street, Porterville, CA 93257

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Op-Ed *Monumental Outlook Over the Horizon*  
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## Porterville Organized Crews: 60 Years in the Making

Historically in the Sierra Nevada fire is a natural ecosystem process. When forest fires began the early forest rangers rode on horseback to save the forests, and protect critical mountain watersheds. The rangers couldn't fight fires single handedly so they hired local help wherever and whomever they could.

Today after a 60-year rich history on the Sequoia National Forest and Giant Sequoia National Monument, the Porterville Organized Crews are one dimension of our firefighting organization that now number over 400 personnel. These firefighters, many from Mexican and Mexican-American descent, are not "hot-shots," but are a workforce available 12 months a year, nationwide for a variety of forest project work. Today's local help is a disciplined organization that is divided into three sectors; Scorpions, Cobras, and Black Eagles, and include firefighters 18+ years of age, who pass all basic firefighting tests.

*The history of the Organized Crews are colorful valley tales.* In the early years, around 1925, when a fire started forest rangers had to hire local help. The ranger had to find 30 individuals to go out into the "back woods," stake out and fight fire at \$.71 an hour (1948), and work straight through a 24-36 hour shift. Usually the ranger worked with the local Sheriff's office to "gather up the boys." Over time as a result of this predictable firefighting work, the local men organized themselves to become the Porterville Organized Crews.

*In the late 1950's and early 1960's*, fire crew bosses were chosen and then they selected their individual crews. When word went out a firefighting crew was being gathered, it wasn't uncommon for 500 individuals to be waiting outside the forest service warehouse looking for work. Selections were made on a "first-come, first-served" basis. The men stood in line, grabbed the beltloop of the individual in front of them and waited. When they numbered 25 they were assigned to a crew boss, loaded up in open trucks with aluminum seats, or cattle trucks, and were carted off long distances to the fire. Many of these trips were a 17-hour drive up a dirt road. After reaching the fire, the crews then walked long distances to work on the fireline. A firefighters personal gear was limited to a toothbrush, one pair of spare socks and a jacket.

*In the 1970's*, standardized firefighter training began. The Porterville Crews implemented discipline, developed their own dress code, bought high quality professional fire clothing and equipment.

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***Over the last 70 years***, the biggest changes have focused on firefighter safety, training, and transportation. Today, the Organized Crew's work is varied and sought after nationwide regarding: wildland and prescribed fires, managed resource benefit fires in the wilderness, burned area rehabilitation, fuel reduction, timber stand improvement, fuel break installation, road clearing/brushing/chipping, and trail brushing and maintenance.

***In the last four years***, the program has mobilized crews for wildfires an average of 84 times each year; the majority were fourteen day assignments. Each year, on average, the crews earn \$3.5 million in firefighting employee salaries most in Tulare County. Five, of the 15-crews are experienced with managed resource benefit fire management practices. These crews have extensive experience using wilderness spike camp tactics and utilization of pack trains on national forests. In 2003, the Organized Crews also participated in the Shuttle Recovery efforts which was a significant nationwide historical event etched in the minds of many Americans.

***My warmest thanks go out to all the men who have worked and been a part of these Organized Crews during the past 60-years. Each of your lives are part of a rich and colorful American tapestry called the U.S. Forest Service.***

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Photo: Tina Terrell, Forest Supervisor with past crew sector leaders.

