

Firefighting is another way of learning for Job Corps students

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Leader Reporter

With wildfires raging in the Beaverhead-Deerlodge and Bitterroot National Forests, professional firefighters aren't the only ones called upon to manage them.

Sixteen students and three staff members from the Anaconda Job Corps west of Anaconda are combating the Lutz fire, currently burning 1,066 acres on the west face of Emerine Ridge.

That fire, along with the 2,800-acre 41 Complex Fox Peak wildfires east of Hamilton, combined to close Skalkaho Highway on Monday from mile post 14 to mile post 30, but it's also an opportunity for Job Corps to put the Civilian Conservation Center side of their

education to work.

"The students up here get the opportunity to participate in suppressing wildfires when it's outside of the eight trades we offer, because of the association with the Beaverhead-Deer Lodge National Forest and its mission of 'Care for the Land and Serve the People,'" Sonja Shadow, business community liaison for Anaconda Job Corps. "Since we are a CCC, firefighting is one way to conserve our natural resources and Job Corps is one program that aligns nicely as far as training and putting to work the student population of Anaconda JCCCC."

Shadow explained that while firefighting isn't officially a trade taught at Job Corps, it draws students from all trades at Anaconda and the other 27 Civilian Conservation Centers in

the country.

"We do use the trade instructors and students from specific trades... Students who fill those responsibilities, whether fire suppression or camp crews and culinary students putting together dinners to support the firefighters," Shadow said. "We are a local resource for the forest to tap into for the fires."

And that resource is much utilized by the national forest, with three different call-ups for students to combat the Lutz fire in August and September, said Matt LaTray, Beaverhead-Deer Lodge National Forest incident commander trainee, averaging 14 hours of work a day for 15 or 16 working days.

"The good thing about the

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Job Corps especially for us is it's a guaranteed resource for us on the fire," said LaTray.

"There's a lot of ecology that goes into fire training, knowing the ground fuels and knowing from a cultural standpoint terms like mineral soil (the layer of soil that's clear of vegetation)," education they receive as part of the Job Corps center's conservation mission.

LaTray explained the steps the duties Job Corps students have been assigned on the fire in the past month.

"Their first assignment was digging fire lines and mopping up fires - that is, taking the head out of the ground so it can't rekindle again or start the fire back up again," LaTray said. "They were working with the interagency Hotshot Crew, Type 1 firefighters working as a crew all year long.

"Their second assignment was putting in two miles worth of hose and two pumps into a single source with one line going west and one line to the north," he said. "And now they're back holding and mopping up on our north flank, and they're working

with the Beaverhead-Deerlodge Type 2 firefighters."

Building camaraderie on the fire lines now is essential for the students and fire crews, since unlike with Type 1 crews they only just started working together and just had an eight-hour refresher training compared with the 40 hours of training at the beginning of the fire season, LaTray said.

"It's more about establishing the interpersonal relationships, knowing what people are capable of and what they aren't," he said. "It's been a long fire."

Fire status

The Lutz fire, a lightning-caused fire that started Aug. 6, 2011, is located 20 miles west of Philipsburg in the Sand Basin and Mount Emerine areas, according to the Incident Web Service site,

www.inciweb.org.

The fire burned actively to the south and southeast on Tuesday. All fire activity is west of Emerine Ridge. Crews are prepping in a line to the southeast to keep the fire in the 4,560 acre identified area.

The 41 Complex fires grew 800 acres on Tuesday, pushed by hot and dry conditions and breezy winds. Approximately 80 firefighters on four crews have been assigned to the fires.

A Red Flag Warning for increased fire behavior potential is in effect until midnight Wednesday. Skalkaho Pass has been closed by the Montana Department of Transportation due to the extreme fire behavior, heavy smoke and rolling and burning debris falling onto the road.