



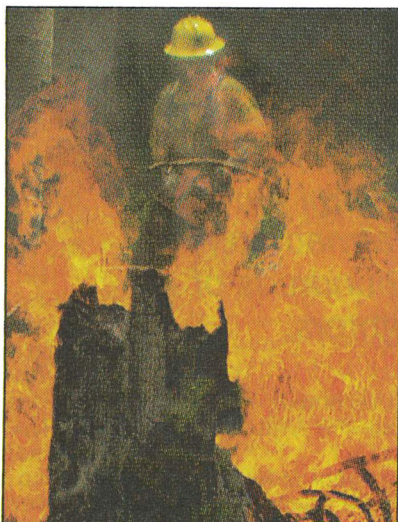
JEN CONKLIN / Monitor staff

**Above:** Ron Klemarczyk of Hopkinton and Alan Quimby of Epsom. **Below:** A firefighter in Colorado.

# ANSWERING the CALL

Local  
firefighters  
talk about  
battling and  
surviving  
the wildfires  
out West.

AP



By CAROLYN EDY  
For the Monitor

**W**hen the call comes at 2 a.m., the last thing a wildland firefighter wants to do is run around counting underwear. That's why, just after returning from fighting fires in Colorado and California, Eric Wilking and other members of the first two New Hampshire crews sent out this season did their laundry and repacked their belongings.

"You keep a bag packed," said Wilking, at home in Belmont after fighting the Hayman fire in Colorado, his seventh such trip since 1998. "You're not bringing your Sunday best, so you can commit some old socks."

New Hampshire has more than 200 wildland firefighters, both men and women. Self-appointed and federally certified, they include forest service employees, teachers, foresters, firefighters, retirees — any profession is

possible.

Half are signed up with state firefighting crews, but if they're regular state employees it's coincidental. The other half are federal employees with the White Mountain National Forest who have signed up "over and above their jobs," said Alexis Jackson, spokeswoman for the national forest.

State crew members earn about \$11 an hour, while fed-

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eral crew members are paid their regular wages and sometimes hazard pay. "It's still not a lot of money," said Jackson. "Most of them do it because they love working on fires and they want to be of support to people that need the help."

The first federal crew from New Hampshire left Tuesday for the Daly Complex Fire in Wyoming. "This year, of course, is particularly bad, so we're expecting this is just the beginning," Jackson said.

All wildland firefighters in New Hampshire have completed training in forest fire behavior, suppression and safety, and they've each demonstrated an ability to carry 45 pounds over three miles in less than 45 minutes. They have made arrangements with their jobs and families and are prepared to head off whenever and wherever they're needed to fight wildland fires.

But if you're picturing a firefighter sliding down the pole, donning his boots and zooming off to battle a raging blaze with a blast of water, think again.

Though wildland fires are as fast and furious as structural fires, fighting them is all about "hurry up and wait," said Wilking. Attacking a fire such as the 138,000-acre Hayman Fire requires careful planning to maintain everyone's safety, and it involves very little water.

"You're asked to hustle . . . then it may be half an hour until you get an assignment," said Wilking, who is a captain with the state's Fire Academy, where firefighters are trained to fight structural fires. "You see the fire raging on the hill, but you can't go get it because you don't have orders yet."

Wilking enjoyed a rare experience in wildland fire fighting before returning home last Sunday. Not only did his crew get to answer New Hampshire's first call of the year on June 13, but it also got to participate in each phase of containing the fire.

"The fire was still raging when we got there," said Wilking. "We helped create the fire line to bring it under control, then moved in to mop up to make sure it didn't get out of control, and then started the rehabilitation phase to help the forest renew itself."

A fire line is a cleared path about 3 feet wide - a fuel-free zone intended to halt the fire when it hits the line. The lines are cleared down to bare dirt with rakes, shovels, brute strength and pulaskis - tools with a

hoe on one end and an axe on the other. Lines are first cleared quickly, then "mopped up" by a crew that double-checks the line and puts out small fires where sparks may have jumped the line.

The final stage, rehabilitation, is just as vital. Fire lines leave the ground open to soil erosion, so the crews build "water bars" of dirt, logs or rocks to divert future rain or snowmelt, and they rake vegetation and debris back over the fire lines to return the land to its more natural condition.

"It's a great way to go out, get some exercise, do some good and make a little money on the side; it's a lot of fun," said Wilking, adding that the high elevation, the hard work and the proximity to fire make it difficult. "The smoke at some points is unbearable."

It can take months to bring a fire under control, so most wildland firefighters get to take part in only one phase of the containment process. Trips are limited to 17 days because they require crew members to work 14- to 16-hour days away from their jobs and families. Firefighters must be home at least 48 hours before they go out again.

"A rested firefighter is an awful lot more safe, and that's what we're looking for right now is for everybody to be safe out there," said Bud Nelson, chief of forest protection for the state Division of Forests and Lands and a self-described travel agent for the state's wildland fire crews.

Ron Klemarczyk of Hopkinton has made seven trips with state fire crews since 1977, including trips to fight a notorious Montana fire in 2000 and the Yellowstone fire of 1988.

His crew, the second to be called up from New Hampshire this year, had quite a different experience than Wilking's.

Klemarczyk is a consultant forester who also volunteers as a special deputy forest fire warden. He missed the first call to join the Colorado crew by two hours. Five days later, on June 18, Klemarczyk got a call in time to join the second crew.

"I said, 'Where are we going?' 'We don't know.' 'What time do I have to be at the warehouse?' 'We don't know,'" Klemarczyk recounted. "They don't want to make arrangements until the full crew is available."

Around 7 that night, he was told



AP

Sawyer Jared Grams walks through a burned-out region near Show Low, Ariz., on June 26. Grams was one of thousands of firefighters from around the nation who answered the call for help.

to be at the state's storage warehouse off South Main Street in Concord by 1 a.m. His crew was assigned to the Cannon Fire in Walker, Calif. Already, three men had died in a plane crash while fighting the fire.

"The goodbyes were a little harder this time," Klemarczyk said.

At the warehouse, crew members donned their Nomex (a smolder-proof fabric) green pants and yellow shirts, received their fire shelters and knapsacks, enjoyed each other's company and a catered breakfast - and waited.

Looking like a crew of rugged daffodils, they boarded two commercial flights in Manchester. Klemarczyk shared a row of seats, and

mistakenly enter the wrong shelters.

Klemarczyk's crew was placed on "initial attack," which means that members were on standby in case a lightning strike ignited another fire in the vicinity or the main fire jumped the line somewhere.

"It's real important to be available, but if you're not needed it's pretty boring," Klemarczyk said. "You go out there pumped with adrenaline to fight a fire and then have to invent games to bide the time."

Contact sports such as football and baseball aren't allowed in the camp because they can cause injury, so firefighters played hackey sack or shovel guard toss, talked to each other and read books.

The whole time, Klemarczyk said, everyone was on edge. Someone walking by with a clipboard or putting on a Nomex shirt to keep warm would send a false alarm through the camp.

In the end, only the third, fourth and fifth days of the second crew's trip were spent working on the fire, with members widening and improving the fire line in places and rehabilitating the ground in others.

The crew's sixth day might have been spent traveling to another

fire, but a lookout spotted a fire building up inside the fire line and was afraid it might jump. So the crew spent two more full days in camp before being sent home early, on June 27.

Other fires were still burning, but the crew didn't have enough time left to go fight them.

"We had very mixed feelings coming home," Klemarczyk said.

Alan Quimby of Epsom was on the same crew as Klemarczyk. An assistant mailing supervisor for the state Department of Administrative Services, he has been a volunteer firefighter since 1976 and has been on 20 wildland fire crews since 1987.

In Montana in 2000, Quimby had a fire storm come over his crew for four hours. "I never saw so much fire in my life," he said. "There was so much fire in such a concentrated area. The whole valley was just on fire and it was coming right at us."

Though wildland firefighting can get "a little nerve-wracking," Quimby trusts his training and his supervisors.

"They practice and preach safety so much, if you're in an area where you shouldn't be you should know when to get out," he said.

"... They're not going to put us in a situation where we're going to be burned over."