

SWOSU Students Heading to American West to Work with Wildland Fire Agencies

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The Southwestern Oklahoma State University wildland fire program in Weatherford spent many hours this past spring semester conducting prescribed fire class exercises, and 12 students are now on their way to work this summer with wildland fire agencies in the American West.

Participants have burned over 1,500 acres under the supervision of SWOSU Program Director Eric Pritchard. The objectives of these burns are two-fold, according to Pritchard. They are designed to provide students with practical prescribed fire experience and help control invasive species such as the Eastern Red Cedar.

In a cooperative relationship with the U.S. Forest Service, the Ozark – St. Francis National Forest annually certifies SWOSU students as federal wildland firefighters. Teresa Williamson, acting Deputy Fire Staff officer from the Ozark – St. Francis National Forest, recently conducted a wildland fire refresher course on the Weatherford campus.

The annual training consists of classroom instruction and administration of a work capacity test. The work capacity test, commonly known as the pack test, must be passed annually by each wildland firefighter. The firefighters must be able to walk three miles in 45 minutes while wearing a 45 pound weight vest.

As Administratively Determined Firefighters for the Ozark – St. Francis National Forest, SWOSU students will have the opportunity to be sent out on fires with U.S. Forest Service supervisors.

The SWOSU Parks and Recreation Management Department offers an Associate of Science degree in Wildland Firefighting and a minor program in Wildland Fire Management. Program graduates typically find employment as wildland firefighters with federal agencies such as the U.S. Forest Service, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the National Park Service, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Other graduates work with a variety of municipal and state departments.

This summer 12 SWOSU students will be working with wildland fire agencies in the American West. Seven students will be working with the US Forest Service. Karch Bullard, Edmond, will be an engine crewman on the Uinta-Wasatch-Cache National Forest in Wyoming. Jon Ericson, West Point, Nebraska, will serve on the fuels crew at the Kaibab National Forest in Arizona. Jordan Brashear, Bartlesville, will work as an engine crewman on the Nebraska National Forest in Nebraska. Wes Rose, Weatherford, will serve on the fuels crew at the Sierra National Forest in California. George Mas, Moore, will work as an engine crewman on the Modoc National Forest in California. Riley Akin, Frederick, will serve on the fuels crew at the Rio Grande National Forest in Colorado. Justice Bratcher, Muskogee, will work in the Umpqua National Forest in Oregon.

Charlie Hess, Fairview; Alex Holding, Minco; Beau Srader, Shattuck; Cody Ewing, Mustang; and Dalton Skipworth, Mountain View, will work with Grayback Forestry, a private wildland fire company, in Oregon. Several students chose to remain in Oklahoma this summer working with local and federal agencies.

Those interested in the SWOSU Wildland Firefighting Program can contact Prichard at eric.prichard@swosu.edu or SWOSU College of Professional and Graduate Studies Interim Dean Dr. Chad Kinder at chad.kinder@swosu.edu.