



‘Best Thing I Have Ever Done’: Report from Riverbend Fire Crew

By Brett Dunten, Riverbend Fire Crew Supervisor
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The Camp Riverbend Fire Crew was involved with five different fires in August, from the local Hilgard Fire started by a train just two miles up the road, to the Imnaha Canyon fire started by lightning about 20 miles west of Joseph, Oregon.

The crew has been working with local agencies, the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), and the Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF), making use of our type 3 Engine, type 6 Engine, and the hand crew. We have had anywhere from eight to 15 guys working on fires at a time.

The young firefighters have had some interesting connections and experiences. The Clarks Creek Fire near Elgin was a 300-acre fire on private land. The landowner came down to introduce himself to our guys — it was former Oregon Rep. Mark Simmons, who was the Speaker of the House back when the legislature provided funding for Camp Riverbend to be built. While fighting the Morgan Ridge Fire near Imnaha, we met a gentleman named Tim Roberts who is good friends with Oliver North, the famous U.S. Marine Corps lieutenant colonel. Tim worked with youth 25 years ago in Maryland and said he felt connected with us. He said he would like to come tour our facility and learn about ways to help our program become bigger, better, and stronger.

The young men’s experiences working on fires have been life-changing. I hear remarks from them like, “I feel like a real person. This is the best thing I have ever done.” They’ve gotten to see the Big Dipper and the Milky Way, which some of them previously thought was only a candy bar.



Riverbend youth participating in fire training with the Oregon Department of Forestry in June.

Watching them sit down for dinner after fighting fires has also been quite an experience — I have never in my 17-year career seen firefighters get so excited to eat a military MRE (meal ready to eat). Above all, the respect and hard work these young men are demonstrating is immeasurable. Their hard work is not going unnoticed — the USFS and ODF are extremely satisfied with the work the youth are putting in.

Fighting fire is a dirty, dangerous, and tough task to complete, but these young men have become respectful, they have learned self-worth, and they are committed to doing their best. As the fire supervisor, I have found it very rewarding to see the work they complete. They police themselves in a very professional manner when working fires and being in the public eye. OYA should be proud of the heights these young men are reaching. I am proud and excited for these young men's futures.



Resting after a long day of work in the field.