

Meteorologists on the scene helping with forest fires

By Julian Granka, Sacramento Bee

National Weather Service meteorologist Mike Smith sits at a desk most of the year. In wildfire season, however, he takes on a new persona: He wears a fire suit and camps out for days at a time at ground zero of major forest fires.

Smith spent a week and a half this month as the resident meteorologist at the Mill fire in the Mendocino National Forest – the 55th fire where he was the meteorologist on scene.

“I got here the day after it burned 10,000 acres,” he said while he was finishing up his work there.

Smith and the weather experts like him are the “incident meteorologists” who inform firefighters of every nuance of the weather – from heat and humidity to changing gusts of wind. They make those calls from their tents and makeshift offices in the camps where fire crews refer to them as an “IMET.”

Such on-scene weather experts are essential to building strategies to fight major wildfires. Using an IMET’s information, fire chiefs determine the most effective and safe ways to contain raging fires.

“You belong to them,” Smith said. “For any incident, any fire, you’re the weather support for that particular site.”

Julie Hutchinson, a California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection battalion chief, explained the need for detailed information about past, current and future weather. “We can go in and remove vegetation, remove grass, brush, and timber ... but the one thing we have zero control over is the weather,”

she said.

So that the fire crews know what to expect, an IMET briefs them each morning before they head to the fire.

“They’re writing the forecast for the shift package that the crew carries in their back pocket,” said veteran IMET John Snook. As predictive services manager for the interagency Northern California Geographic Area Coordination Center, Snook now provides long-term decision-making support regarding wildfires.

During their 15-to-16-hour days, IMETs also provide constant weather guidance and outlooks for the coming days.

By getting out of the office, an IMET “can stand under a fir tree” and take local measurements of temperature, humidity and wind, said Snook. For a firsthand look, an IMET often gets even closer to the fire, doing the same assessments with the firefighters on the line.

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