

Cadets learn wildland fire skills in the field



U.S. Forest Service firefighter Elsa Gaule instructs fire academy cadets May 3 on how to build a line to prevent the progression of a wildland fire. Photos/Leona Allen

By Kathryn Reed

Fighting a wildland fire is nothing like a structure fire.

The tools are different, the terrain is not the same and the amount of time it might take to knock down the fire could be the difference between days and hours.

It's a skill unto itself.

That is why a component of the Lake Tahoe Basin Fire Academy is wildland fire training.

The 24 cadets, who are set to graduate at the end of June, spent Saturday putting to practice much of what they have been learning in the classroom when it comes to fighting a wildland fire. All day May 3 they were cutting lines on Spooner Summit.

“They need the ability to cut vegetation, wherever that is. It doesn’t have to be a forest,” Leona Allen, who coordinates much of the academy operations, told *Lake Tahoe News*.



U.S. Forest Service firefighter Corey Buckley checks to make sure cadets are correctly using their fire shelters.

Then they worked on deploying shelters, having to think about where the safe zone is if the fire is racing uphill – because fire travels so much faster uphill.

Successful completion of this section of the academy earns them a certificate in basic wildland firefighting. It’s not uncommon for a cadet or two to get picked up by an outfit before they graduate.

“They have to go through several sections of classes that all together are part of the basic wildland certificate. It includes everything from basic wildland skills, tools used in wildland fires, weather, fire behavior and a leadership class,” Allen said.

Leadership, while always important in the fire world, is even

more critical on a wildland fire because crews can be so spread apart. It's very much a team concept, where everyone has one person they report to so there is structure among the ranks.

The cadets must become proficient with the tools involved in wildland fires. They include a Pulaski, which looks like an ax that is turned sideways. They can dig and chop with it.

"They can chop manzanita or another deep rooted shrub out of the ground to remove the fuel," Allen explained.

There is the McLeod, which is like a big square rake, shovels and a combi tool that is used mostly for digging.



Cadets run uphill with fire shelters to escape from fire in a scenario from their wildland fire training.

Adeptly being able to wield a chain saw is a higher-level skill that firefighters can achieve. Then they would be known as a sawyer.

The Tahoe academy uses the national model so then the cadets could work anywhere – not just California. People who do this type of work for a living teach courses.

"We are serious about this training because it's all about your safety. I don't want to have to knock on your door and

explain to your parents, your spouse or your children that you won't be coming home ever again," Forest Service Capt. John Chester told the cadets.

CalFire also has training, but it would not allow cadets to be hired right out of the academy with the U.S. Forest Service or Bureau of Land Management or out of state. However, it's likely next year with changes to the CalFire curriculum it will be incorporated into what the academy at Lake Tahoe Community College offers.

Plenty more training is available, including command classes and other specialties. Wildland firefighting isn't just about being on the line. Firefighters are on engines, work as prevention officers, and are in helicopters as well as airplanes.

The need for skilled wildland firefighters is expected to be even greater this fire season because of how dry everything is as the drought continues to persist in much of the West.

"I hope everybody takes to heart that we are hotter and drier earlier than normal and fire danger is imminent," Allen said. She lost her house once – in June 2007 during the Angora Fire – and is ready if things go sideways this year.

In early April a small wildland fire was quickly extinguished by the U.S. Forest Service and Lake Valley firefighters. (Allen works for Lake Valley as the public information officer.)

"The majority of fires are human caused. Where we need to start is with prevention. Behind that, good defensible space; good evacuation skills for your family; and preparedness in general," Allen said.

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Notes:

- Lake Tahoe Basin Fire Academy graduation is June 28 at noon in the Duke Theater at Lake Tahoe Community College.
- For those interested in the academy, there is a mandatory orientation Aug. 7 at 6pm. For more info, email lallen@mail.ltcc.edu or call 530.544.4660, ext. 540. The program is twice a week from September to June.