

Tahoe fire crew achieves hotshot status



The Tallac Hand Crew is now the Tallac Hotshots. Photo/USFS

By Kathryn Reed

Twenty of the best firefighters in the country are now based out of South Lake Tahoe.

The Tallac Hand Crew that was created in 2001 is now the Tallac Hotshots. They went through a rigorous process to ascend to this prestigious status.

“It’s a pretty big deal and a pretty big accomplishment,” Kit Bailey, Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit fire management officer, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

These are the most elite firefighters. There is no higher level than this Type 1 team. They are assigned to the complex fires and work the toughest terrain in remote locations where their lives are often on the line.

Days off are rare, though things have changed since Bailey was a hotshot. In those days bosses were not as cognizant to the

need for a little down time and the ability to reconnect with their families. Still, a day off may only come every 14 days.



“When I was on a hotshot crew, you’d think you are going home and you get about five miles from the station and then you get another call. You make a left turn and who knows where you will be for the next week,” Bailey said. “You can’t even

expect you are going home until you walk in the front door. And that may only be for a few hours.”

Supervisors are expected to be available 24/7.

Of the 20 members, eight are full-time, year-round employees, while 12 are seasonal. The one woman is in a supervisory position. Some are graduates of the Lake Tahoe Community College Fire Academy.

While the physical strength required for the job is obvious, the mental toughness is another aspect. That isn’t something that can be taught. They have to deal with working practically around the clock in an uncontrolled environment, under conditions that are brutally hot.

Because of this it was teamwork, leadership and the administrative capabilities that were most scrutinized when the group of evaluators examined the Tallac crew.

The final test of the multiyear process to become a hotshot team was a three-day review by a cadre of Forest Service personnel.

“The biggest part is leadership and qualifications for those leaders,” Bailey said.

Nearly a day and a half was spent making sure the team had its

administrative and management skills in place. This is because all of the parts and pieces of fighting a fire are complex, Bailey said. It's so much more than putting water on fire and the muscle to do so.

Then the inspection team did a 1-on-1 leadership exercise, and went over all their equipment and vehicles.

Finally, it was time to get outside to prove their moxie. They had been given a scenario of a mock fire. They cut line for more than four hours. All that time their speed and progress was being timed and measured. Surprises were thrown at them like a spot fire crossing the line.

"There is a lot of emphasis on crew communication," Bailey said.

Suddenly a radio is out. Now communication must be face-to-face. A power line crosses their path. Aircraft is incoming with water or retardant.

How the crew deals with these situations is being tested.

One of their own goes down, creating an incident within an incident.

Ultimately they must deploy their shelters.

They passed every test they were given.

Besides this three-day test, the Tallac crew has been peer reviewed while in the field at real fires. There are about 2,000 hotshots through the United States.

While other teams in the Lake Tahoe Basin have tried to achieve hotshot status, this is the first to successfully do so.

"It gives us a higher level of knowledge, skill and experience we can rely and depend on in basin," Bailey said.

But like all hotshot teams, they are not solely assigned to fires in their home territory. The local crew has been working the Coleman Fire in northwest Nevada just south of the Oregon border.

“They are a national resource,” Bailey said of all hotshots.