

Sixty firefighters get hands-on wildfire training at Fire Camp



Delaware Forest Service veteran James Dowd of Townsend keeps a watchful eye on a controlled burn in a field at Blackbird State Forest as part of the agency's annual Fire Camp training session.

Sixty volunteer firefighters attended the Delaware Forest Service's 18th Annual Fire Camp on Saturday April 20 at Blackbird State Forest – an intensive one-day training session that tested their physical stamina and mental preparation and culminated with a hands-on “live-burn” fire simulation. As the capstone of the Forest Service's wildfire training, successful completion of the program leads to coveted “red-card” certification from the National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG), which makes attendees eligible for out-of-state fire assignments. Last year, Delaware dispatched personnel to fight wildfires in Colorado, Wyoming, and Idaho.

The day began shortly after 7 a.m. with an arduous “pack test,” which requires crew members to complete a three-mile course in under 45 minutes while carrying a 45-pound pack. From there, participants rotated through how-to sessions on wearing fire protective gear, deploying an emergency fire shelter, communicating on the fire line, operating a chainsaw, and completing required documents.

The afternoon's activities focused on conducting a carefully controlled simulated burn exercise at a nearby forest tract, putting the group's classroom skills to practical use on a real fire.



Attendees at the Delaware Forest Service's Fire Camp begin the "pack test," a 3-mile, 45-minute physical fitness test. At right, Glenn Gladders of Dover (back) and Sam Topper of Federalsburg MD check off the final times.



An important skill for a wildland fire crew is learning to "dig line," which involves using a hand tool such as a pulaski to create a fire break to contain an advancing fire. Here, the "hand crew" preps the field for a controlled burn.



From left, National Park Service staff member Loniel Lee of Dover, Harry Dillman of Pennsylvania's Chester Township Fire Company, and Thomas Caffery of Slaughter Beach's Memorial Fire Co., listen to the Delaware Forest Service's Erich Burkentine of Milton as he leads a training session on chainsaw operation at the agency's 18th annual Fire Camp held at Blackbird State Forest.



Nikki Testa of Wilmington is a certified EMT who has been a veteran on Delaware's wildland fire crew for many years. A growing number of women are participating in the wildland fire training

sessions.