



Fire Prevention

Meet the Cibola Forest's Fire Staff Officer and learn the insider tips for fire season safety.

In his placid office at Cibola National Forest headquarters in the Northeast Heights, Fire Staff Officer Matthew Rau keeps a shadow box displaying 19 pieces of granite. Each fragment—some dashed with rust, others flecked with black—is as distinct as the man it represents: one of the Granite Mountain Hotshots who lost their lives when the 2013 Yarnell Hill Fire overran them outside Prescott, Arizona.

Although based in Albuquerque, Rau was part of the Central West Zone Incident Management Team—a consortium of forest service personnel called up to handle big blazes. So as the 2013 fire started to grow, the team gathered. They, in turn, deployed the Granite Mountain Hotshots. Rau and the other incident managers had mentored the hotshots since the team formed and Rau considered the hotshots close friends and colleagues. On June 30, 2013, all but one of the 20-man crew perished.

Immediately, Rau, and the incident management team, was taken off the fire and began caring for the “fellas,” as Rau calls them. They orchestrated everything from flowers to coffins for the fallen men’s funerals. When the investigation was complete, Rau guided each of the 19 families to the site where their husbands, fathers, or brothers were killed, talking with the families about what happened that fateful day. And, each time he visited the site, he slipped a single fist-sized piece of granite into his pocket.

The shadow box, as well as a black-

and-white photo of the hotshots that hangs above it, isn’t a shrine, he says. It’s a reminder to make good decisions as he manages prevention and active blazes for the Cibola National Forest, which not only protects the Sandia Mountains outside of Albuquerque, but also encompasses 1.6 million acres in New Mexico, Texas, and Oklahoma.

As we talk, Rau’s Mr. Rogers–esque cardigan is buttoned over his standard-issue forest service uniform shirt. He’s calm and approachable. His mustache turns up on the ends, leaving the impression he’s always slightly smiling. He seems just

the person you’d want problem solving, steadily moving one chess piece at a time on the topographical playing board to keep a wildfire from engulfing a town.

Rau is a self-described forest service brat. “That’s everything I knew growing up,” he says. “I knew the green trucks. I knew the people’s passion for the work they did. I saw how hard the fire fighters were training, and we’d hear them going out in the middle of the night sometimes.” Occasionally, his mother, who was in the service, was one of those grabbing her gear in the night. She’d come home from the fire line with pictures, cans of rations, and other trinkets that immediately captivated young Rau. “I thought the most rewarding thing a person could do with their efforts was to help people who need help, and help protect our ecosystems from uncharacteristic wildfire,” he says.

Although his educational path gave him a broad understanding of natural resources—forestry and watershed functions, for example—Rau has always wanted to be a fire manager. When he first went through guard school in 1988, fire was the enemy. “It was kind of like war time,” he says.

"When there was a fire, we mobilized our army and you 'fought the fire.'... Looking at the advancement of thought from then to now, fire is a necessary part of our ecosystem."

This new perspective means Rau, Cibola's fire staff officer since August 2016 overseeing a team of 45 permanent fire managers, doesn't really have an off-season. "The off-season is all about planning and looking for opportunities to apply fire back into the environment. It's not just about the application of prescribed fire. We do lots of thinning and vegetation manipulation. Wintertime is almost busier than summertime," he says.

Rau takes time to "put the pulaski [a wildland fire tool] down and look up a little bit." He's found passion in identifying a piece of land that needs management and shepherding a proposal through the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process—a set of compliance hoops not every person would want to jump through. However, doing so and seeing the effect on the land is "the culmination of all I ever wanted to do," Rau says.

During the Southwest's March-to-October fire season, Rau's staff swells to 100. Still there are more non-fire days than fire days, so the forest service uses this man and woman power for fixing fences, painting bathrooms, clearing trails, and cutting hazard trees. However, during fire season, Rau and his team members are coiled springs waiting to be unleashed. "When the call comes through you just get that surge of adrenaline and you go," he says. Since every fire is different, it means "coming up with a solution when you have no idea what the solution is in the moment. It keeps it exciting," he says.

In the field, the teams rely on camaraderie to push through exhausting days felling trees and digging lines. "It's pretty rapid team building. You need to pretty instantly come to some understanding that you have my back and I have yours," Rau says.

When there's an active blaze, the hotshots and everyone on the incident team works 14- to 21-day shifts, with two days off between. Even then, disconnecting from the fire can be challenging since

most wildfire fighters live in communities near where they work, sending their kids to school with the families they are protecting and seeing those whose homes are threatened at the grocery store.

Despite the difficulties, Rau strives to turn off his front-line attitudes when he's home. First, he laughs, "You can't manage your three small children like you manage an incident management team. It just doesn't work!" He continues, "My deal is: I make good decisions while I'm out. I'm going to come home safe. I'm going to come home. That's my promise to them. And when I come home, I'm going to be dad and husband."

Much of that attitude emerged from his experience with the Granite Mountain Hotshots. "An incident like that can rearrange your molecules. It's how I communicate with my family. It's how I make decisions. It's how I prioritize actions. It's how I train people. It's how I am," he says.

The accident also changed how the forest service trains and communicates with fire managers. "I can say without a doubt that because of that incident we

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are building smarter fire managers, safer fire managers, and having dialogues at levels that we've never even come close to talking about before," he says. "It wasn't just our core team that the incident affected, it was the world. The whole key is that they didn't die in vain."

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RAU'S TIPS FOR FIRE PREVENTION

1. Understand the conditions, and the five, color-coded levels designating fire potential (www.fs.usda.gov/detail/inyo/home/?cid=stelprdb5173311). "If you don't have a concept of the conditions, you could be in a spot where wildfire will impact you. If it's such a danger for folks to be out, we will help them make the right decisions through restrictions or closures. But if you have an open flame in the woods, the potential for fire is there," he says. In New Mexico's arid environment, it may not even be an open flame that causes wildfire; it could come from something as simple as a tow chain sparking on asphalt and igniting roadside grasses.

2. If you see something, say something. If you see smoke or flames, don't assume someone else has reported it.



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