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Rio Hondo College Wildland Fire Academy Graduates to Aid U.S. Forest Service in Brushfire Battles

College's crew was also called up in early July.

WHITTIER – Rio Hondo College’s Fire Crew 77 will be deployed at 10 a.m. Saturday, Aug. 8 for the second time this summer to help the U.S. Forest Service combat a slew of brushfires across the state.

The Roadrunners crew, composed of graduates from Rio Hondo College’s Wildland Fire Academy as well as a few recent graduates from its regular Fire Academy, will activate for a two-week period, helping provide relief to professional crews.

“These deployments are a terrific way for our academy graduates to gain experience, training and earn some money while they are seeking their first jobs,” said Superintendent/President Teresa Dreyfuss. “We also are proud to have them represent us on the front lines of our state’s annual battle against destructive fires.”

When summer started, the crew was short of its usual 16-person complement – because other fire agencies have been aggressively scooping up Rio Hondo graduates.

“I can’t keep up with the demand,” said Rio Hondo College Wildland and Fire Coordinator Tracy Rickman, who also serves as chief of Crew 77.

The academy has a 100 percent placement record, which prompted Rickman to offer a second training class in 2014-15 to see if he could provide additional graduates to meet the high demand. The effort – difficult to do since the fall fire season can sap the academy’s training staff – generated a record 65 firefighters. Forty-one were quickly snagged by wildland fire agencies.

“Nineteen graduates were hired in one fell swoop to serve in the Plumas National Forest,” Rickman said. “And veterans who take the training are typically hired incredibly fast.”

MORE

Rio Hondo College, located in Whittier, California, is committed to the success of its diverse students and communities by providing dynamic educational opportunities and resources that lead to associate degrees, certificates, transfer, career and technical pathways, basic skills proficiency, and lifelong learning. For information on the College or its programs, please call 562-692-0921 or visit www.riohondo.edu.

That left 14 graduates available for the crew, prompting Rickman to supplement his team with two members of Fuego Tech's Rangers Crew 76 when it was activated July 3 for a two-week mission fighting brushfires in the Saugus River Ranger District in Santa Clarita. While not on fires, the crew performed project work, hazard reduction, and general station maintenance, as well as participated in a rigorous daily physical training program.

For the second deployment, Rickman is supplementing his crew with graduates of Rio Hondo's regular Fire Academy. Graduates from the academy typically seek posts with urban departments, but their training meets the certification standards for wildland service.

The college may consider a cross-training effort between the two academies in 2015-16 to help boost opportunities for wildland training.

"Rio Hondo College is known far and wide for the strength of its Fire Academy," said Board of Education President Madeline Shapiro. "The demand for our graduates is a shining example of the recognition of that strength."

CAPTION

FIRECREW: Members of Rio Hondo Fire Crew 77 – known as the Roadrunners – hike along the 14 freeway as they help combat a brushfire in the Saugus Ranger District in Santa Clarita on July 12. The team heads to anchor a fire line as smoke billows up from the blaze.

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