

On-Call Crews Build Careers While Boosting Capacity— An Early-Career Assignment

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By Joaquin Pastrana

Joaquin Pastrana recently completed an assignment on the Northern Idaho Burn Crew, based in Coeur d'Alene, as part of the North America Fire Team's on-call burn crews project. During the 2021-2022 service year he worked with the Yolo County Resource Conservation District as a fellow through GrizzlyCorps, a joint program between University of California at Berkeley and AmeriCorps that sends college graduates into rural communities to promote regenerative agriculture and forest resilience.

It was less than a year ago when I began to seriously consider the idea of a career in fire and prescribed burning. And it's only been eight months since I completed my S-130/S-190, pack test and S-130 field day through Audubon Canyon Ranch's Fire Forward program. During these early pieces of training, I was still unsure if this was something I wanted to do, but I was fortunate enough to be in great company. My mentors and coaches throughout my early fire education—Sasha Berleman, Erin Banwell and Miller Bailey—all had so much knowledge to share and were incredibly passionate about what they were teaching. It was this passion that encouraged me to take the next steps in my fire career. This included applying and earning a spot in Fire Forward's Prescribed Burn Practitioner Fellowship to continue to be mentored by Sasha, as well as signing up for several more TRES and prescribed burn trainings to continue to learn from Erin and Miller. It was also the encouragement of my mentors that pushed me to take a step out of my comfort zone and try new possibilities in the world of fire, which led me to sign up for a two-week wildfire assignment in Idaho with The Nature Conservancy.

I remember the days before my trip being incredibly nerve-racking, as I was about to be in a completely new place with new people doing work that I had never done before. I wasn't sure what to expect and was both anxious and excited. The flight was short and soon I was outside the Spokane airport waiting to be picked up and driven into Idaho with three other members of my crew I had



Joaquin Pastrana (*right*) on assignment near Coeur d'Alene, ID.

just met a moment ago. As we arrived in Idaho and the reality of the situation set in I was still incredibly nervous and unsure. I was afraid that the mentality in wildland firefighting would differ greatly from that of prescribed burning, and the people I would be working with wouldn't have the same passion as my mentors did that inspired me to get into fire in the first place.

Those fears quickly disappeared after meeting our leader, Katie Sauerbrey, and sitting down with the rest of the crew for dinner on our first night. Katie did not take long to make it clear what their expectations of us were—to always give 100%, to look out for one another, and to look for ways to encourage rather than belittle. As we went around the table we learned about each other, what we hoped to get out of these two weeks together, and our expectations of one another. While everyone there came from vastly different backgrounds, we all shared similar goals and expectations: to learn as much as possible and to treat one another with respect.

As the days progressed, these expectations were never questioned, and our crew quickly facilitated an environment of cohesion and support. This was evident throughout the trainings we held together, as we practiced radio briefings, dug handline in our specific order, and worked together to complete multiple medical scenarios. Even more so, this was clear through our work, as even though the days were long, and some were a



The North America Fire Team sent 11 fire practitioners to northern Idaho for a two-week assignment. *Back row, from left:* Jordan Byers, Sarah Solis, Elliot Nauert, Joaquin Pastrana, Sergio Trujillo, Christopher Cordwin, Matthew Todd. *Front row, from left:* crew lead Katie Sauerbrey, Haley Bloomquist, John Dooley, Omar Arroyo, Joshua Frick

lot harder than others, we continued to laugh, joke and encourage each other to give our best. I am fairly certain that our ability to continue working through some of the days was solely based on our crew's ability to motivate each other, and our leader Katie cheering us on.

While we continued to train during our work, I don't believe anything could have quite prepared us for the day we had to stop operations and rush one of our crew members down the forest roads to meet an ambulance as their dehydration pushed them into a very serious condition. Our crew was a family, and seeing one of ours in a weakened state did not sit well with any of us. Other than hearing Katie's medical stories from their time on fires, this type of situation was a first for a lot of us, and a serious learning experience of just how serious a situation can be, and fast. As we headed down the mountain the members in my truck expressed concern and worry as we listened to the choppy radio updates, but also communicated their relief that we were fortunate to have such a good crew filled with people trained to handle things like this, such as our EMT Matthew Todd who stayed with our crewmate the whole ride down. The situation was frightening for every one of us, but thanks to each other's support, we continued. We ate together as a team that night, and the next morning came together to discuss the events of the situation, how we felt, and what we could do to make sure something like this doesn't happen again. As we processed what had happened, it was clear that it was now more important than ever for our team to work as one and encourage each other to continue, and that's exactly what we did. As we headed back to work the next day, our crew brought everything we learned from the situation with us, continuously checking up on one another, picking up the

slack for other members if they were struggling, making sure everyone was hydrating, and even stepping in when other crew members need to keep up would stop them from admitting they need help. The medical incident, although scary, taught us just how much our crew cared for one another and how much we could persevere, as we continued to do strong work for the rest of our time in the Idaho Panhandle National Forest with our comradery and respect for one another never diminishing, and the encouragement from one another as well as our leaders only becoming greater each day.

After such an incredible time in the forest with some amazing people, it was difficult to say goodbye and head home. I was sad that it would most likely be a while before I see some of these people again, but at the same time was excited to come home and share everything I learned with my friends and family. I am truly inspired by the people I had the opportunity to work with on this assignment and am looking forward to bringing the respect, motivation, fun attitudes, and genuine care of my crew members to my work back home. I value all the teachings I was fortunate enough to learn from while I was there, from Katie's stories they told and scenarios they put us through, to the helpful advice I received from my crew mates while on the fire line. As cliché as it sounds, stepping out of my comfort zone for this trip was one of the greatest decisions I've made. This trip changed the way I view the world of fire, and has taken a lot of stress off my shoulders as I know I am in the career I want to be in and working with incredible people.

For more about the North America Fire Team and its on-call burn crews, contact:

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The training and capacity-building work of the on-call crews project is part of the *Promoting Ecosystem Resilience and Fire Adapted Communities Together* (PERFACT) cooperative agreement between The Nature Conservancy, USDA Forest Service and agencies of the Department of the Interior. For more about PERFACT, contact Marek Smith at marek_smith@tnc.org.

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