Incident Meteorologist

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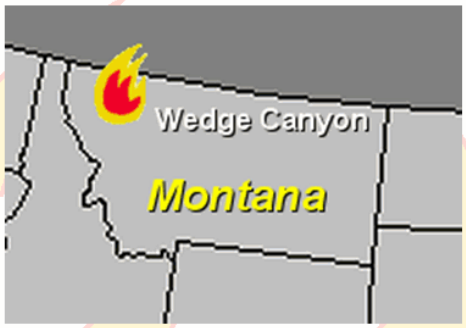
It can be counted on to occur every year. Lightning strikes from summer thunderstorms strike the forest floor, igniting leaves or pine needles that have accumulated over the years. When other meteorological conditions are in place, the result is often raging forest fires that destroy everything in their path. These fires are often so large and so complex that they create their own weather, often strikingly different from that just a few miles away. This is where the Incident Meteorologist comes into play.

The NWS has a small group of experienced fire weather forecasters (approximately 60 nationwide) known as Incident Meteorologists (IMETs). The IMETs can be and are often sent to remote locations throughout the U.S. to support wildfire operations. IMETs are there for fire crew safety and tactical support to the fire management team. They provide weather forecasts to predict Fire Behavior. The IMETs receive special training in microscale forecasting, fire behavior, and fire operations which makes these fire weather forecasters a key member of the fire management team.

The IMET may also be dispatched to offer weather assistance to other incidents such as chemical leaks, oil spills or anywhere else that precise forecasting over a very limited area is crucial to protect lives, property and resources. I am pleased to be the staff IMET at the Little Rock Office. I completed my training this summer and was dispatched to three wild fires in the Western United States. These fires were the Encebado Fire in New Mexico, the Kelsay Fire in Oregon and most recently the Wedge Canyon Fire in Glacier National Park in Northwest Montana.



Incident Meteorologists use special equipment in preparing forecasts used in wildfire suppression and prescribed burning. The IMET uses the All Hazards Meteorological Response Systems (AMRS). The equipment combines advanced computer software and two-way satellite communications. AMRS provide NWS meteorologists high-speed access to state-of-the-art weather data when at a remote location, without relying on the use of phone lines. The fast download speeds are advantageous for IMETs, since they require large, highly perishable meteorological data sets to perform their jobs. IMETS can deploy rapidly and set up the portable unit near the fire lines in a matter of hours. Forecasters also use laptop computers to access information from local NWS field offices. They can receive the latest information about standard surface and upper air observations, as well as Doppler weather radar and weather satellite data to make these specialized forecasts.