

NINA MOINI: All hands have been on deck to try to contain more than a dozen wildfires across Northeastern Minnesota. That includes young adults who are members of the Conservation Corps of Minnesota and Iowa, who usually spend their service term restoring habitat and managing natural resources in the region. Here to share more about what the crew is up to and how they're managing this difficult time in Northern Minnesota is Brian Miller, field programs director with the Conservation Corps. Thanks for being with us, Brian.

BRIAN MILLER: No problem. Thank you for having me.

NINA MOINI: So my understanding is, you are the one kind of at a home base, thinking about strategy and logistics and communicating with your crews and where they're located. That's a really big job because you're the one that is in touch with everybody in some kind of uncertain situations at times. Can you tell us a little bit about the conditions your crew has been facing, just over the past couple of days?

BRIAN MILLER: Yeah, for sure. As you can tell from some of your previous reporting, wildfire response is a real coordinated effort between federal, state, and local agencies. So myself, along with all of our district managers and our crews, are in contact with our federal partners, with our state partners, putting people on call and trying to be ready to respond.

I think what's unique with the current situation is, we've all been, whether you're up near the fires or down in the Twin Cities, dealing with high humidity, record temperatures, and then air quality from the smoke. And so, what's unique here is, our crews are helping to fight fires in really remote areas, but also, under really extreme conditions that really tax their physical health and the skills and training that they've had.

NINA MOINI: Absolutely, lots of difficult elements. How did your members end up being a part of this coordinated effort? Is that something you would typically do?

BRIAN MILLER: Yeah, so Conservation Corps of Minnesota and Iowa has been a partner of the Minnesota DNR for about 46 years, and we have a long-standing agreement with the DNR to provide wildfire suppression and support. And so we maintain a group of about 100 trained wildland firefighters. So they receive the same training that any federal or state person doesn't get, what we usually call a red card that shows their qualifications. And then we maintain an on-call list with what we call a duty officer.

So, folks know ahead of time when their schedule is coming up when they'll be on call, meaning have your bag ready to go, have a pet-sitter lined up, those kind of things. And then when we get a call from our partners at The Minnesota Incident Command Center, we will then call those crews and dispatch them. So they really don't know how long they're going to be gone or necessarily even where they're going or what incident they'll be on. Once they get sent outright, then they could be gone for as many as 16 days, usually--

NINA MOINI: Wow.

BRIAN MILLER: --doing all kinds of different tasks.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, that's a long time. Can you give us a sense for how many people go out together or just how the crews are working in conjunction with everybody else?

BRIAN MILLER: So it varies from agency to agency. For Conservation Corps, we're typically sending out crews of between four to six young adults. They're taking off in a pickup truck with a lot of hand tools, so what we call bladder bags-- you can imagine a large squirt gun attached to a backpack-- rakes, swatters to help put fire out.

And then they're tying in with the incident command at these incidents, or whoever's in charge, and doing all kinds of stuff. So they could be putting new line in to try to stop a fire, or they could be setting out hose lays where they're actually connecting hose and maybe putting it to a pump in a tender or in a pond, or they could tie in with an engine crew from one of our partners. So there's all kinds of different stuff they're doing. But in general, our crews are these mobile five to six folks that are moving around and just plugging in wherever they can be useful.

NINA MOINI: Can you give us a sense for-- I know these are young people, not to take anything away from them, but this is a really big situation. This is a dangerous situation. This is for young people to give back and get some training. How are you supporting your staff in that way while they're helping with these fires?

BRIAN MILLER: Yeah, so all of our members, when they first come to their service term, go through a lot of training. And one of those trainings is the National Incident Command System. So they learn through a federal course how to plug into an incident command system. This is something the federal government and the state government use to respond to any kind of disasters, wildfire included. So you learn the structure for command, and you learn all the language that's associated with that.

And then in partnership with the DNR, they go through about a 10-day course where they learn pumps, they learn how to use radios, they learn how to use all their safety equipment, and, also, things like when to speak up if something doesn't seem safe, when to fight fire, but provide for safety, and when to pull back, all those kind of things. And so, safety is top of mind.

And then they also go through a physical fitness test, which looks to mimic what they might encounter on a wildfire, to make sure that they know what they're getting into and that they have the physical fitness and the protective equipment to be able to face those conditions. So we try to really prep them ahead of time, both with training and safety briefings, and then, also, support them as they're out with just regular updates and all that kind of thing.

And they're learning those skills. They're also, then, networking with folks who work at all different levels of wildfire throughout federal and state and local agencies. So when they're done with their term of service, they have those skills. And if that's something they want to pursue as a career, they already know folks in the field.

NINA MOINI: Could you give us a sense, Brian, for what crews might typically do after a wildfire has gone through an area? We know that fires are a natural part of the ecosystem in the system. But do you guys ever try to rehabilitate after a wildfire comes through? Is that part of this journey?

BRIAN MILLER: Yeah, so it's a great question. And a lot of times on the news, you see the flashy part. The initial attack is what we call it. A lot of the work occurs actually after the flames are out, when crews are involved in what we call mop-up. So that is going around and reinforcing the perimeter of the fire, and then also doing grids through the fire area to find hotspots to put things out that could possibly reignite.

And then, like you say, after the fire is out and we've all kind of moved on to the next thing, the forest is generally adapted to these conditions. So a lot of the restoration happens naturally, but there are definitely cases where crews will come in and work on erosion control. As you can imagine, after a really big hot wildfire, there sometimes can be problems with erosion.

And then, also, with replanting, again, in partnership with the Minnesota DNR, a lot of native plant trees that are adapted to the area and that are grown in our state nursery, going out and reforesting and doing planting, rehabbing trails, rehabbing trail signs, those kind of things. So there is a lot of work to follow up and get things back to the state that we all need them for recreating.

NINA MOINI: And we all look forward to when that kind of work can happen, but as you know and as we've been hearing, these officials and meteorologists are saying this is going to be a long time ahead, and it might actually take snow to be the moment where these fires are finally out. It seems like they're trying to just manage what they can at this point. With that in mind, I know you mentioned a 16-day or a two-week deployment. Do you have a sense for how long you expect your crews to be helping out up there?

BRIAN MILLER: Yeah, so we have crews based all throughout the state of Minnesota and even in Iowa that come up to assist in the state of Minnesota. And so, crews will go out on these 16, sometime 20-day assignments. Then they'll go into a rest period and, if there's still a need, be replaced by other crews that are waiting on-call to come up behind them.

So an individual who's in the service term with us could see multiple wildfire deployments over their year of service, but with needed rest days in between to recuperate, catch up on personal life, and get ready to go back out. So we have this group of about 100 crews across Minnesota and Wisconsin, and they all take turns to help us meet the demand from all these different incidents.

It is a lot right now. But the other thing we have to keep in mind is, there's all the folks on these incidents in Northeastern Minnesota, but we also have to keep a reserve in case other fires start in other parts of the state, so that we can quickly respond there as well.

NINA MOINI: And just lastly, Brian, there's what's going on in the forest, there's the wildlife side of things, there's, obviously, wanting to first prioritize public safety, and there's also a lot of people watching on in fear for their livelihoods. We've had some reporting on that already in the show. What are you hoping that your corps members are getting out of this experience?

BRIAN MILLER: Yeah, I'm really hoping that, in addition to that important skill building and networking for future careers and that sense that they get that sense of community and giving back. A lot of times, folks come to the Conservation Corps to learn about wildlife or to learn about things other than forestry, but when you talk to folks when they're done with their term of service, if they've had a wildfire response or other disaster responses, they often relate back to that as the most meaningful because of the people they meet, the communities that they interact with.

And so, I hope that they leave with a sense of that connectedness between all of us across the state and across the country, how we rely on each other. They're often on these fires with other firefighters from far away in the United States, from Canada, and even internationally, beyond North America. And so, I hope they take that away, and then, also, a sense of just what it really takes to manage and provide the opportunities for things like the Boundary Waters, where it's a wilderness, but there's still a lot of management in order to make sure that people are able to use that wilderness area safely and get back to it when it's ready.

NINA MOINI: Thanks so much, Brian, to you and your crews and for coming on the show. We really appreciate your time.

BRIAN MILLER: Thanks for having me.

NINA MOINI: That was Brian Miller, field programs director with the Conservation Corps of Minnesota and Iowa.