Recently, I had the opportunity to watch a video of astronaut Mike Mullane. Colonel Mullane describes what led to the Challenger Space Shuttle disaster and how defective o-rings had been previously identified as a serious issue. One engineer went so far to say that the o-rings were an “urgent design flaw.” So why did Challenger successfully fly so many times and why wasn’t the problem fixed sooner?

It’s human nature to take shortcuts. Diane Vaughan, a sociologist at Columbia University, describes it like this: “Social normalization of deviance means that people within the organization become so much accustomed to a deviant behavior that they don’t consider it as deviant, despite the fact that they far exceed their own rules for safety. People grow more accustomed to the deviant behavior the more it occurs. To people outside of the organization, the activities seem deviant; however, people within the organization do not recognize the deviance because it is seen as a normal occurrence.”

Many times, this new normal leads to a “successful” end—nothing bad happens! Those new to the organization or who have not experienced the consequences of this new lower standard may not even recognize the deviance until something tragic happens.

So what can a fire department do to reduce the effects of this? Here are a few suggestions.

- Set high standards, and recognize the normal human tendency to drift away from them, especially during high pressure, time sensitive incidents.
- Train yourself and your firefighters. Not just to a level of competence, but to a level of proficiency where muscle memory takes over and errors are almost impossible.
- Instill a feeling of ownership in your firefighters. What better way to ensure they recognize the importance of the every-day tasks such as truck maintenance and checking expiration dates on medical supplies?
- Wear full personal protective equipment, every time, all the time. And enforce the standard with every fire department member.
- Listen to that voice in your head (and your safety officer) when it warns you about something bad that could happen.
- Set trigger points and take pre-identified action when they are met.
New Faces in NFS Wildland Fire Protection Program

Michael Doherty is the Fire Management Specialist located in Chadron. Michael is from Laramie, Wyo. and has an extensive fire background. After graduating from high school in 2006, Michael attended the Fire Science program at Casper College in Wyoming. While attending Casper College Michael was introduced to wildland fire and entered his rookie year in 2007 with the Casper Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The following year he moved to Vernal, Utah to work for the BLM - Green River Fire District. While working in Utah, he attended the University of Wyoming, earning a Bachelor Degree in Range Ecology and Watershed Management.

Over the span of six years working in Utah, Michael has had the opportunity to broaden his skills by working alongside type 1 and 2 crews, smoke jumpers, helitack crews, fire use modules and engine crews from around the country. Michael’s fire experience has been expanded with the opportunity to fight fires in 11 western states.

Over the past few years Michael has been the Engine Captain on both type 4 and type 6 fire engines. Michael left the Green River Fire District in Vernal, Utah in October of 2013 as a fully qualified engine boss, faller B, type 5 incident commander, engine operator, resource advisor and firefighter 1. He is also a type 4 incident commander, crew boss, firing boss and fire effects monitor trainee.

Michael will be facilitating the wildland fire training needs of firefighters in western Nebraska and will also be running the Single Engine Air Tanker (SEAT) base at the Chadron Municipal Airport; you may also see him out on the fires helping local resources when ever needed.

Mike Morgan joined the Nebraska Forest Service as an Office Associate in October 2013. Mike will be supporting the Wildland Fire Protection Program. A native of Lincoln, Neb. and graduate of Lincoln Northeast High School, Mike enlisted and served four years in the U.S. Marine Corps as a heavy equipment operator. He served in Operation Desert Storm in Al Jubial, Saudi Arabia during the 1991 Persian Gulf War. Upon his return to Lincoln, Mike studied Business Administration at Southeast Community College, and was previously employed by Ailant Communications as a Service Representative, as well as ABF Freight System as an Operations Supervisor. Mike is eager to serve the statewide community of fire protection and prevention personnel. Call him with any questions or program support needs.

Nebraska native Seth Peterson is the Fire Management Specialist now stationed at Valentine. Seth will offer wildland fire training and manage the SEAT base at Miller Field in Valentine.

Seth comes to NFS highly qualified. He grew up on a farm just outside Osceola and began his fire career with the Osceola Fire Department, which he joined while still in high school. He has an Associate’s degree in Fire Protection Technology from Southeast Community College in Lincoln, and received his Bachelor’s degree in Communication Studies and Agricultural Leadership from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. While at UNL, Seth was the Student Director for prescribed burning at the University’s Nine Mile Prairie, where he helped teach students about safe prescribed burning and led them through many successful burns.

Seth spent three seasons as a wildland firefighter with the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation. As a firefighter and engine boss in a strike team of Type 5 engines, Seth worked his way up to incident commander for many wildfires in Montana and other western states.

Seth is looking forward to bringing his experience and energy to his new position. “Nebraska’s volunteer fire departments are our first line of defense against devastating wildfires,” he said, adding that he can’t wait to share his knowledge and skills while helping make Nebraska’s firefighters as prepared and knowledgeable as possible for fighting wildfires aggressively, yet safely.

He is also excited to provide Nebraska’s firefighters with the services of our state’s first SEAT program. “As departments learn about the benefits of having a SEAT plane in their backyard, they will understand just how useful they are in suppression of aggressive wildfires.

Calendar of Events

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<th>Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>Feb 7-9</td>
<td>Les Lukert Winter Conference, Kearney</td>
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<td>March 14-16</td>
<td>NEMSA Spring Conference, Columbus</td>
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<tr>
<td>April 26-May 4</td>
<td>Nebraska Wildland Fire Academy, Fort Robinson</td>
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<td>May 16-18</td>
<td>Nebraska Fire School Grand Island</td>
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Fire Shop Mythbuster

For 13 years I have explained some of the same things many times and still the rumors surface every once in a while regarding the Nebraska Forest Service (NFS) Fire Equipment Program! Here are the three biggest urban myths of the program and, as Paul Harvey would say, the “rest of the story.”

Myth #1—NFS can take our equipment at any time to go fight wildfires.

Not true—the only way a truck will be removed without consent is if the equipment is being abused, not used as intended for wildfires or negotiations to correct identified faults have exhausted all possibilities.

Myth #2—NFS can tell us to go fight wildfires with our trucks.

Also not true—Those VFD’s that have equipment on loan from NFS may receive an invitation to join forces, but will not be forced to come fight fire.

Myth #3—If the United States is ever attacked on home soil, the Army will take our trucks back to fight the enemy.

Again, not true—I’m not sure how this one ever surfaced, but if the Army wants your fire truck to face an armed enemy, I think we should let them.

The Bottom Line: This equipment is on loan to be used for firefighting and emergency use, so there is no reason to wonder if the equipment might be taken on a whim. Ironically, Myth #1 came up again recently from a young firefighter with a VFD that has three of our vehicles in their fleet.

So the next time you hear any of these rumors, please help me put them to rest. As always, please contact the Fire Shop with your maintenance questions and parts support needs. So far I have heard about a lot of fire activity in the state already, so I wouldn’t wait until March to get ready for the season. Be safe and call anytime!

Lew Sieber
Fire Equipment Manager

Nebraska’s First Firewise Community

The northeast edge of Valentine, the area that suffered the greatest structural losses during the 2006 fire season, has become Nebraska’s first Firewise Community. The Big Rock Rim Community encompasses an area containing 119 primary structures and approximately 355 residents. It includes single family homes, duplexes, two assisted living facilities, two churches and a city park.

Firewise Communities/USA is a national program incorporating the efforts of homeowners, local communities, public agencies and others to increase wildfire protection for homes and communities. The Firewise® approach involves landscaping, home construction/design and community planning. This is important because wildfires are inevitable and becoming larger and more frequent. Because it’s so difficult to stop large wildfires, focus is shifting to preventative actions to reduce potential fire intensity and structure ignitability BEFORE a fire starts.

The first step toward becoming a Firewise® Community is doing a community assessment that evaluates a neighborhood’s strengths and weaknesses in the context of vulnerability to wildfire. Kalli Kieborz, executive director of the Niobrara Council, worked with community leaders and the national Firewise® program to identify an area for a pilot Firewise® Community.

The assessment identified strengths of the community along with issues that could be addressed to further increase community protection. Participation in the program is entirely voluntary and will not cost people any money beyond what they decide to do to improve the safety of their own homes.

The residents who attended organizational meetings formed a local Firewise® team to develop and implement an action plan in which residents can participate to improve the safety of their neighborhood. They are currently working with Kieborz and Seth Peterson of the Nebraska Forest Service to implement the plan.

The establishment of this first community serves as a template to help create a series of such communities in the central Niobrara River watershed. Cherry County has designated the Niobrara Council to manage funds and administer the program along the Niobrara National Scenic River and nearby areas.

Kudos to the Cherry County Board of Commissioners, the Niobrara Council and the Big Rock Rim Community for continuing the battle to make our communities safer and setting an example with Nebraska’s very first Firewise Community!

Sandy Benson
Fuels Management Specialist
NWFA ‘14
The 7th Annual Nebraska Wildland Fire Academy will take place at Fort Robinson State Park, April 26 - May 4. Here are the classes being planned.

S-130/S-190/L-180 Basic Wildland Firefighter
S-131 Firefighter type 1
S-133 Look Up/Down/Around
S-200 Initial Attack Incident Commander
S-212 Wildland Fire Chain Saws
S-231 Engine Boss (Single Resource)
S-234 Ignition Operations
S-270 Basic Air Operations
S-273 SEAT Manager
S-300 Extended Attack Incident Commander
S-330 Task Force/Strike Team Leader
S-390 Introduction to Fire Behavior Calculations
NWFA Incident Management Workshop
National Weather Service Severe Weather Spotter Course

Fire departments should receive the 2014 Volunteer Fire Assistance Application and 2014 Emergency Assistance For Wildfire Control with this issue of The Rural Firefighter. If you did not receive them, please call Mike Morgan at 402.472.2733.

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