

USFS -- Vets Battle Blazes Nationwide

Michael Archer | January 04, 2010

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Dwarfing all other fire agencies, the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) spans the continent and protects 193 million acres of America's most beautiful landscapes. With a budget of more than \$5 billion, nearly half is spent on preventing and fighting wildfires, this federal agency employs 34,250 employees in 750 locations, which include 10,050 firefighters, 737 law enforcement officers, and 500 scientists who work at some of the most advanced fire science labs in the world. This is the first of three installments that take a look at this important fire agency.

Entry Requirements

So what does it take to get hired by USFS? "Candidates have to be 18, be a high-school graduate or have a GED, and have to be able to pass the 'pack test,' a three-mile hike in less than 45 minutes while carrying a 45-lb pack," explains Reynaldo Rivera, a recruitment specialist with USFS at Los Padres National Forest in Southern California and a Vietnam-era Army vet. "We advise potential recruits to go to college, obtain some temporary employment, then come look us up."

But as with anything worthwhile, the process to get hired on full-time may take a while. "What we recommend is for the kids to apply for temporary employment first because we want them to see whether this is really what they want to do, because it is a physically demanding job," Rivera advised. "GS-2 is the lowest level that we'll hire at, which is someone with no experience whatsoever."

"We just finished the hiring for the apprenticeship program and we had literally thousands of applications due to the state of the economy, so it's very, very competitive."

Variety is the Name of the Game

Working for USFS is not a boring, mundane job - variety is the name of the game. "When they get to a fire, they're going to be on the fireline for awhile, whether it's cutting line, laying down hose from an engine, supporting a helicopter crew that's dropping retardant on a fire," Rivera continued. "One good thing about working for the Forest Service is that we have a tremendous apprenticeship program that can take anywhere from two to four years to complete and covers the whole gamut of what it takes to be a firefighter, rotates you around several fire stations, so when you come out you're a full-fledged firefighter."

ABOUT MICHAEL ARCHER



Michael Archer is a wildfire consultant and writer. He has written articles for *Home and Fire Magazine*, *Wildland Firefighter Magazine*, and other publications, lectured to many groups about fire issues, been quoted by Associated Press and USA Today reporters, and also appeared on cable and network TV discussing wildfire issues. Currently, he is acting as webmaster and technical consultant to Wildfire Research Network (www.wildfireresearch.org), a Los Angeles-based citizens' action group that promotes firefighting issues involving the Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI).

His "Firebombers Incorporated" series of novels gives readers an intriguing "what-if" scenario on how 21st century technology could modernize the wildland firefighting force. His novel "Firestorm," received excellent reviews from *Writers Digest*, *The Nashville News*, *The VVA Veteran* (Vietnam Veterans of America's magazine) and firefighting professionals across the United States. His company, Firebomber Publications, donates 50 percent of net profits to organizations that support the families of injured and fallen firefighters.



You can visit his website at: www.firebomberpublications.com

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And not every job is on the fireline. "I went into the Army as a 46-Quebec, you know, photojournalist, based out of Fort Drum, New York, but I was never really there," recalled Andrew Madsen, a former Army staff sergeant with the 10th Mountain Division, currently Public Affairs Officer for Los Padres National Forest. "I ended up working in a recruiting office where there was also a USFS office. They had an opening for a GS-11 job, so I applied for that and got it, and worked at that office for seven years."

And you can make some decent money on campaign fires. "There's the opportunity to make more money on fires," Madsen agreed. "If you're working 16 hours a day and you do that for 14 straight days, which is eight hours of overtime each of those days."

Veterans Welcome

"Veterans make great recruits because they're disciplined for the most part, are motivated, dedicated and employ teamwork, which is very important, 'I'll cover your back, you cover mine,' which carries over to fire," stated Rivera. "They know what they're getting into — it's a lot of work."

Madsen concurs. "Anybody who is honorably discharged is automatically a five-point veteran, so if you're the only guy in a pool of potential firefighting recruits with five points, that's good for you. Now you get another five if you've served in a combat zone."

Age? Disability? No Problem!

"When I got out, I had two beat-up knees -- I can hardly walk sometimes, so that plus an internal problem I had gave me 30 points from the VA, which opens up another whole level of consideration when you're applying for federal work," said Madsen. "So I'm a 10 point veteran with a 30 percent disability, and even if I hadn't been in a combat zone, I would still have gotten the full 10 points because of my disabilities."

And the age-related hiring ceiling is disappearing as well. "In the past, applicants for firefighter positions could not be considered if they were more than 37 years old," Rivera, also a disabled vet, added. "We just received a memo that the age limit has been waived, but only for veterans."

"So if veterans meet all the qualifications and are more than 37 years of age, they can still apply and be considered for hire as a U.S. Forest Service firefighter."

For more information, go to <http://www.fs.fed.us/r5/employment/rst.php>

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