

# The Daily Courier

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## IN CASE OF EMERGENCY: New Northern Arizona team gets first wildfire drill

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WALKER - Northern Arizona's new Type III incident management team was put to the test Friday during an all-day wildfire drill based in Walker.

To an outsider, the list of problems that popped up every five minutes seemed unrealistic. But not to the experienced wildland firefighters who created the mock list.

"We sat down and thought about what would be likely to happen," said Pruet Small, a retired Central Yavapai fire manager who was director of Friday's annual Prescott Basin wildfire drill. He came up with the scenarios alongside fellow retired Central Yavapai firefighter Todd Abel. Both now serve on an elite Type I national incident management team.

The drill involved a wildfire sparked by fireworks that was forcing the evacuation of Walker, a small forested community just southeast of Prescott. But participants also had to deal with other incidents that popped up during the wildfire battle.

For example, one family was desperate for help to find two 12-year-old boys before evacuating. Then firefighters found a barrel of unknown chemicals in the path of the



Les Stukenberg/The Daily Courier

Firefighters learn how to use the structure protection sprinkler system as part of the skills section of the Basin Drill near Walker Friday morning.

### **COMMUNITY EMERGENCY RESPONSE TEAM: Volunteer organization takes part in large-scale drill**

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PRESCOTT - It seemed quite real.

Friday's large-scale wildfire simulation, involving fire agencies and other emergency response teams, blanketed the tri-city area as part of its mock training exercise. Emergency officials from a variety of agencies filled the emergency operations center (EOC) at Prescott City Hall, set up an incident command post near Walker, and

flames near Lynx Creek and needed someone who could assess its danger.

A Hotshot firefighter broke his ankle. The media showed up seeking an interview, while drunken motorcycle gang members were causing trouble at a nearby campground.

Another wildfire ignited three miles south of Prescott and someone reported potential suspects leaving in a Jeep. And neighbors evacuated to a Red Cross shelter were arguing about how well their homes were protected from wildfire.

The Type III team dealt with each issue as it came along.

"It's organized chaos," said Tony Sciacca, a retired Prescott Forest fire manager who now leads a Type I team. He was helping oversee the drill.

"Having a team that works together all the time, knows the incident command system and continually trains makes it go a lot more smoothly," said the new Type III team's Incident Commander Todd Bentley, also Groom Creek's fire chief.

It was the first big test of the new Northern Arizona Type III team that is now ready to respond to emergencies across the state, from floods to blizzards. It still has to do more work to qualify to respond to wildfires.

The idea for all-hazards response teams across the country emerged after 9/11, said Small, who joined the 9/11 emergency response in New York City. Now about 50 such teams exist, but most of them don't have the required skills to respond to wildfires. The Northern Arizona team will, so it will be somewhat unique.

coordinated an American Red Cross shelter on the campus of [Yavapai College](#) as part of the drill.

This year's exercise, coordinated through Yavapai County Emergency Management, also included members of a Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) for the first time. The CERT worked under the direction of Yavapai County Emergency Management.

According to Yavapai County CERT Coordinator Eric Lash, the organization, sponsored by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), trains interested volunteers in basic emergency response and preparedness. In community emergencies, team members can be assigned to assist in their own neighborhoods or to other emergency response agencies as needed.

"We're also trained to be first responders if there aren't any first responders," Lash said. "We're trained not to go beyond our training. That's very important. We're all volunteers. We don't have any kind of liability."

As coordinator, Lash worked hand in hand with the Yavapai County Emergency Management Coordinator Denny Foulk during the simulation at city hall.

City governments and staff are all briefed on the incident from the EOC, Lash said.

"The (Walker) incident command post is where the front-line fire guys work. We talk to them by public safety radio," Lash said.

CERT volunteer Jim Lockwood was assigned to the makeshift Red Cross shelter. Lockwood and his wife, Georgene, only recently became CERT volunteers.

"The times right now can be a little scary. There are all sorts of things going on. I'm getting older and my wife is getting older, we live out in Williamson Valley, and we felt it would be an excellent idea to learn how to be self-sufficient, and also how to help our community and our neighbors in case something bad happens," Lockwood said.

The drill, he explained, helps educate everyone involved in how to respond to different situations that might arise in the tri-city area, which could include anything from natural disasters to terrorist incidents.

"We got a call that the Red Cross was setting up the

Arizona now has Type III teams based out of northern, central and southern Arizona, noted Chuck McHugh, Arizona Division of Emergency Management assistant director. ADEM provided \$10,000 worth of equipment for the new team. McHugh was in Walker to support the drill Friday.

"Success is a function of practice," McHugh said.

Other states also can seek help from the teams, he noted. For example, the Phoenix team responded to Hurricane Sandy last year.

The Prescott region already has a reputation for some of the best wildland firefighting interagency cooperation in the country, and the Type III team will only enhance that, said McHugh and several other experts.

"One of the things that attracted me to work here is the cooperation among agencies, and it seems to have gone to a new level the last few years," said Pete Gordon, fire staff officer on the [Prescott National Forest](#).

It's rare to see an incident management team and emergency operations officials working so closely on a drill, said retired law enforcement officer and firefighter Sam Whitted of Flagstaff, another Type I team member helping to oversee Friday's drill.

The Type III team will be a real asset for northern Arizona, Whitted added. It will respond to fires and other emergencies that are beyond the capacity of local resources.

"It provides leadership coordination for fires we know are going to go beyond initial attack," he explained.

Numerous fire departments from the Verde Valley joined the exercise by filling in on regular station duties for local firefighters who were battling the wildfire, Bentley explained.

"They did that during the Indian fire (at Prescott in 2002), and it's been that long since we exercised that part of the plan," Bentley said.

Perhaps no one was enjoying the drill more than Peter Cecil, a wildfire instructor from Australia who was watching how Americans do their jobs.

"This has been absolutely fantastic," Cecil said. "I'm a big advocate of drills in the field like this."

shelter and they thought it would be a good idea if we came as observers and learn about what they do. We're observing and helping out in any way we can," Lockwood said.

Red Cross crews set up beds and prepared to register and feed more than 100 displaced Walker residents as part of the drill, according to Red Cross spokesperson Brian Gomez. Red Cross volunteers were also on hand at the Prescott City Hall EOC and in Walker.

"The simulations calls for 60 homes that are evacuated and 50 homes that are destroyed," Gomez said. "We're doing a simulation for roughly 110 homeowners. We go through and set up cots, go through a feeding operation, and we have animal services for people who come into the shelter with pets. We're trying to make it as real as possible. We know that, inevitably, there will be a wildfire up here sometime this summer or next summer. It's bound to happen at some point, and we want to make sure we're as prepared as we possibly can be."

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