

Smokejumpers

They jump out of an airplane and parachute to the ground, prepared to battle the awaiting blaze. They are smokejumpers - their job is to attack small wildland fires before they grow too large. Smokejumpers also assist with large firefighting efforts when expertise or leadership assistance is needed. Their primary mission is initial attack.



First On The Scene

- Smokejumpers are highly trained wildland firefighters whose mode of rapid transportation to the fire is an airplane and parachute.
- When the call comes in, a predetermined number of jumpers “suit up” and board the plane within 10 minutes.

- If a fire is burning within 100 miles of their base, smokejumpers can be at the scene in about 30 minutes.

Going To Work

- Once they reach the blaze, the plane circles while the jumpers decide the safest way to attack.
- A smokejumper “spotter” drops weighted paper streamers from the aircraft to determine the speed and direction of the wind.
- The airplane climbs to 3,000 feet and two jumpers exit the plane on each pass over the jump spot.
- From airplane to ground, smokejumpers maintain contact with fire dispatchers at all times in case they need additional firefighters, supplies, or run into difficulties.

Equipment

- Smokejumpers wear a padded kevlar jump suit to protect them from brushes with trees, rocks, and from the fire itself. A helmet with a metal face grate protects them from tree branches or rocks.
- The combined weight of their suit and gear totals about 80 pounds when they exit the plane.



- A “fire box” containing tools, food and water to support two people for up to 48 hours is dropped by parachute for each pair of jumpers on the scene.

- Once the fire is out, all gear and equipment must be carried out on packs to the nearest road or helicopter landing. Pack out bags can weigh up to 110 pounds and be carried up to 10 miles or more.
- Specialized gear used, (personal gear bags, jump suits, pack out bags, harnesses, etc.) is made on site by the smokejumpers themselves.
- Parachutes are purchased from manufacturers, but may be repaired on site by a qualified parachuter.
- BLM smokejumpers use ram-air square parachutes, while Forest Service jumpers use round parachutes.

Training

For the rookies (first-year smokejumpers):

- Successful completion of a physical fitness test is necessary before a rookie may progress in the program.
- About 20 hours of classroom training is required before hands-on training begins.



Smokejumpers

- Hands on training will include mock parachute training, pump and chain saw use and maintenance, tree climbing, water landings, and parachute jumps.
- Altogether, rookies must complete a four-week training program to become a smokejumper.
- Successful rookies will complete their training in Alaska, where they spend several weeks fighting Alaskan fires before returning to the lower 48 states.



Rookie smokejumper training.

For the veterans (returning smokejumpers):

- Successful completion of a physical test is required before a smokejumper may return to the program.
- Refresher training is then required in parachuting, tree climbing, and operational techniques.
- Some smokejumpers receive Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) training, which is updated annually, so they can deal with injuries that may result from parachuting or firefighting.

- A daily physical training program is established and required throughout a smokejumper's career, which includes running, push-ups, sit-ups and pull-ups.

Safety

- Safety is the number one concern for every smokejumper.
- The safety record is remarkable with only three parachute related fatalities in 58 years of smokejumper operations and more than 130,000 jumps.
- During that time, only two fires have resulted in on-the-ground fire-related fatalities. Thirteen smokejumpers died at Mann Gulch in Montana in 1949, and three died at South Canyon in Colorado in 1994.

BLM and Forest Service Bases in the West

- Originally the BLM smokejumpers were stationed in Fairbanks, Alaska.
- Their effectiveness was proven in the Great Basin area (Idaho, Utah and Nevada), and the team split sending 53 smokejumpers to the Boise, Idaho base at NIFC in 1986.
- There are seven Forest Service bases located in Winthrop, Washington;

Grangeville and McCall, Idaho; Missoula, Montana; Redmond, Oregon; West Yellowstone, Montana and Redding, California.

- There are about 400 smokejumpers located among these two BLM and seven Forest Service bases.

History

Smokejumping began on a trial basis in 1939 when test procedures and equipment were developed, and followed by test jumps in the North Cascade mountains near Winthrop, Washington.

- On July 12, 1940, the first operational fire jumps were made in the Nez Perce National Forest in Idaho by Rufus Robinson and Earl Cooley.
- During World War II, many conscientious objectors served as smokejumpers in the Civilian Public Service Program. Also, the 555th Airborne Battalion, all black paratroopers, were assigned smokejumper duties in 1945 to combat the Japanese "balloon bomb" threat.
- The smokejumper program expanded under an enthusiastic President Eisenhower in 1959, establishing the network of bases throughout the West and Alaska that exists today.

