

[Try our new and improved mobile app](#)

Alaska Dispatch News

Nation/World

Few women fight wildfires, but it's not because they're afraid of flames

 Author: Darryl Fears, The Washington Post  Updated: November 20, 2016

 Published November 20, 2016

In a male-dominated workforce, female firefighters persevere



 **Play Video** 3:27

WHISKEYTOWN, Calif. – The burn boss scanned the snaking trail of the Swasey Recreation Area through thick black sunglasses.

She saw firefighters scurrying on a hill above in a smoky blue haze. They were setting dozens of fires to burn away piles of sticks and shrubs that a lightning strike or cigarette butt could use to grow into wildfire. Their work was part of a key prescribed burn training that could help them move up in rank.

But there was a much deeper meaning for burn boss Erin Banwell and the firefighters in the haze. All but a few were women, and they were taking part in the first majority female training exchange, called WTREX, in a profession that is known for shunning women.

"We need to create a space for women to develop," said Amanda Stamper, one of the training's organizers, who darted up and down the trail to offer help. "They get held back on purpose because of bias. It makes it really hard for women to function well."

During the first briefing meeting for the three-day prescribed burning in October, Kelly Martin, the fire chief at Yosemite National Park, was floored when she entered a dining hall and saw 35 women staring back at her. "It was just, like, ... stunning," Martin said. "I needed a moment." In more than three decades as a wildfire fighter, she had never seen so many female colleagues in one room at one time.

Women who fight wildfires for the federal government describe their work as isolating and lonely – and scary in a way that has nothing to do with fire. In a male-dominated, hypermasculine discipline that operates like the military, they face discrimination, sexual harassment and verbal abuse.

Nearly 45 years ago, women sued for better access to firefighting jobs. Under court order, the Forest Service's operation increased female recruitment in a region that includes California, where bias against women is some of the worst in the nation, civil rights advocates say.

But when the order expired 10 years ago, the number of women sharply fell because, critics say, the service failed to adequately address a chauvinist culture.

Women hold about 12 percent of the government's permanent wildfire suppression jobs at the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management and National Park Service, and retaining them is a challenge.

A sample of recent Equal Employment Opportunity complaints show why many choose to leave.

Heidi Turpen, a former firefighter for the Forest Service, said male colleagues routinely propositioned her for sex and told her women didn't belong at her station in the Sequoia National Forest.

Alisha Dabney, a former Forest Service wildfire crew member said she was ordered by a supervisor to report when her menstrual cycle started and was placed in a headlock during an attempted rape. She said she was fired after reporting the harassment.

Anda Janik, a former firefighter who settled a claim against the Navy in 2013, was not provided with facilities to shower at a fire station outside San Diego. Janik said in an interview that she was forced to knock on a battalion commander's door each morning to ask to use his office shower.

Other women said they were propositioned for sex, inappropriately touched, stalked, photographed without their knowledge, spied on while bathing and screamed at because of their gender.

Many women said they are speaking out about abuse because of Fairfax County firefighter Nicole Mittendorff's suicide in April. After her body was discovered in Shenandoah National Park, county fire officials discovered sexually suggestive messages posted about Mittendorff on a website by her co-workers.

The Forest Service, which employs more than 10,000 federal firefighters, far more than any other agency, acknowledges past problems but said it now has zero tolerance for sexual harassment.

The agency said it requires civil rights training for every employee, conducts surveys and has bulked up its contingent of investigators and case workers for a rapid response to complaints.

"We do have positive trends," said Lenise Lago, deputy chief for the agency's business operations. "Data shows that our cases of harassment based on gender are half of what they were five years ago."

Critics say many women don't report bad conduct because they're afraid of repercussions.

Before Martin defied the odds to become one of the highest ranking officers in federal wildfire suppression, she was one such woman.

In testimony before a House oversight committee in September, Martin said she was stalked during a training early in her career and spied on as she took a shower but kept quiet, as many women say they do, for fear that reporting it would hurt her career.

Martin told lawmakers she finally came forward at "great risk to my career" because recent cases have shown that the kind of harassment she experienced in 1984 is still happening.

"As women, many of us feel shame and fear of coming forward to report misconduct and cannot bring ourselves to be the ones who have the difficult and painful task of speaking up about this type of serious allegation," she said.

—

At a small apartment in suburban Los Angeles, Heidi Turpen held her head back to stop tears from streaming down her face.

Turpen was recalling her six-month stint as a seasonal worker last year for the Forest Service, a division of the Agriculture Department, in Sequoia National Forest. She was excited to have a job doing what she loved with good pay and government benefits.

But just three months into the season that started in June, according to her civil rights claim against the agency, the harassment started.

Turpen and another woman on her female crew were exercising with a male firefighter in a gym when another man approached: "When you're done rubbing that (female genitalia) all over yourself," he said, addressing the male firefighter, "you can come have a beer with us."

The women, stunned, debated whether they should report it. Turpen said yes; her friend declined. "She wanted to wait to see if things would get better. She didn't want to ruffle feathers. I said, 'What about my feathers? They're ruffled.'"

Turpen's report to a supervisor triggered a talk with both men. When she returned to the gym, she was told she was banned. She fought that decision and won. Later, she said, when women were moved to a male barrack from an all-female barrack because of a hole in the roof, she and a friend were verbally attacked by a man within days.

"He lays into us about the cleanliness of the kitchen, saying we're attracting bugs and we're dirty and we should be washing dishes," Turpen said.

"Finally he got so close to my face I said you're coming off a bit hostile right now," Turpen recalled. "He said I was being hostile. Females shouldn't be here. He was so close to my face that I was backed up to the refrigerator."

The Forest Service declined to discuss individual claims, but Lesa Donnelly, vice president of the Agriculture Department's Coalition of Minority Employees, confirmed that Turpen is one of several women who brought charges against the agency. California is an especially bad place for women firefighters, Donnelly and other women said.

Several women filed a lawsuit against the service in 1972 for failure to hire and recruit women, which resulted in a push to bring more women into firefighting after it was settled nine years later.

Donnelly, who lives in Redding near Whiskeytown, filed a second lawsuit in 1995 over reprisals against women after the first lawsuit. The experience turned Donnelly into an advocate.

"I get calls every day from women who are getting harassed," said Donnelly. "Obviously, there are a lot of male firefighters in the agency who are pro-diversity, who want women on their crews and want women to get ahead. But there are enough misogynists who want to keep women out of the field and out of managerial positions."

Over the remaining three months Turpen's stint, she claimed that a police officer with a drug-sniffing dog illegally searched her room because of false rumors that she sold narcotics.

"I was also approached by male employees asking for sexual favors. A guy started stalking me." Her anxiety was creeping into paranoia. "My day-to-day life turned into this fear of what was going to happen next," Turpen said.

After the season, Turpen switched careers. "I'm never going back," she said.

—

Diversity training at the Forest Service tries to cover all the bases – bias in hiring and promotion, sexual harassment such as propositions and inappropriate touching, as well as dirty words about women that fly constantly on the crews.

A 2008 National Report Card on Women in Firefighting showed that 85 percent of women said they thought they were treated differently than men. Women reported being exposed to pornography, requests for sex and hostile language 15 times more often than men.

"There's something about firefighting that seems to make it a uniquely discriminatory environment," said Debra D'Agostino, an attorney at the Federal Practice Group who represents Janik and other federal employees. "I deal with female law enforcement officers all the time and I don't hear this sort of thing."

It drives women away.

"Women say I really want to do firefighting but I don't want to hang out with these guys who objectify women and act crass and ... be a part of an environment that's not welcoming to them," said Stamper, a former member of the Forest Service who's now a commander for the Nature Conservancy's fire division in Washington state.

But Stamper and others say the troublemakers are a minority. Some men are trying to help change the culture of firefighting.

One is Travis Dotson, a firefighter who addressed discrimination against women in an essay he wrote in the summer for Two More Chains, a publication devoted to the profession.

"You see crew after crew after crew with no women on them. That's not a reflection of who's applying for these jobs," Dotson said in an interview, explaining why he spoke out.

"There are the things you hear, the egregious, things that are way out there: 'I don't hire women.' There are ... things we don't even realize we're doing," he said. "When a woman is leading a crew, and an authority comes looking for the boss, they always go to the tallest guy in the group. He may be the rookie on the team but always get addressed."

Reaction to the essay was generally positive, he said. "There's real minor instance of men being offended. They felt like I used too broad of a brush. My response is I understand. The intent of the piece was you don't get to hide. Yeah, they see me as a traitor. That's OK, it's worth it to me."

—

Leaning on the handle of her hatchet on the trail at the Swasey Recreational Area, Katie Sauerbrey – 5 foot 3, 118 pounds and wearing a no-nonsense expression – said she has heard it all from men: Women won't last. They belong in the home raising families.

She dismisses it.

"I've been at fires with a 35-pound bag on my back, a 35-pound chain saw and a 10-pound kit. If you have the mental grit to get through that, you belong," she said.

Sauerbrey, a firefighter for the Nature Conservancy who embeds with the Forest Service and National Park Service when needed, said she traveled from her station in South Carolina to the women's training exerciseto work with intelligent and strong women.

"I know a lot of women who have left fire because they did not feel supported or felt there was no room for them to grow," Sauerbrey said. "It's sad for me to see women who have that desire who don't continue because of the culture. It's hard to describe the passion people have for this job. There's no other job I'd rather be in."

WTREX, or Women-in-Fire Training Exchange, electrified female firefighters when it was announced. Ninety people from 12 states applied and fewer than half were accepted for lack of space.

In firefighting, every bit of training is essential. It's the path to the certifications needed to move up in rank and pay. In fire crews throughout the country, where two women are often the maximum, they are often overlooked by the men who lead them. Many are so intimidated, they don't ask questions because guys sometimes mock, so they don't advance.

"This is a safe space," said Lenya Quinn Davidson, a University of California Cooperative Extension adviser who planned the event. "There are no wrong questions. Women feel more comfortable in this environment."

And they had swagger. They barked orders. They paid little attention to the dangerous poison oak they walked over to get to assignments. They wanted to demonstrate something too many of their male colleagues doubt – that women can do the work.

Monique "Mo" Hein was one of several women who came up with the idea for WTREX. They were at a regular training event in North Carolina last year where they were assigned to a barracks for women only.

At night, after hard training days, they sat in a room talking about fire with more comfort than they did around men.

"It was like, 'How do you run a chain saw?' Maybe there were other ways to do it that men don't talk about because they're used to doing it their way," she recalled. The talk got bold. "We wanted to see more women in leadership roles. We wanted to help get them there. All of a sudden, we had this thought about a TREX with all women."

WTREX might have been a safe space deep in the forest, but these women would have to return to their crews.

At the prescribed burn and in the dining hall where firefighters gathered for dinner, they spoke openly, sharing specific instances of discrimination and sexual harassment.

But afterward, nearly all of about 15 women interviewed for this article quietly asked that their comments not be included.

And each one said the same thing: It would hurt their career.