

An Interview with Steven Goldman

By Devin Wanner, Public Affairs Specialist, U.S. Forest Service, Northeastern Area State and Private Forestry

Biography

Steven started his career in Region 3 on the Coronado National Forest in southern Arizona along the Mexico border. "I spent the first 10 years in the Southwest. My first fire was in both the U.S and Mexico. However, I was not in the fire program. My day job was in recreation management (wilderness, developed trails, off-road vehicles). I was a 'militia' firefighter. I spent a summer on the Redmond Hotshots and built my qualifications to the Division Supervisor/Incident Command Team Type 3 during that decade."

Mr. Goldman then moved to Region 8 and spent the next 4 years in Tennessee on the Cherokee National Forest where he worked in the recreation, wilderness, trails, and wildlife programs. He participated in the suppression and prescribed fire programs at every opportunity because the Forest was dependent on "militia" firefighters to do this work. While there, he learned that some places cut and burn to manage vegetation. He also had the opportunity to go out with and support the newly formed Cherokee Interagency Hotshot Crew.

He has been in Region 9 for more than 14 years. Mr. Goldman was a District Ranger on the Huron-Manistee National Forest (HMNF) for 11years. Then he spent 2 years as the Eastern Region Fuels Program Manager before moving into his current position as the Region 9 Deputy Director for Fire and Aviation in 2018.

He has kept up his involvement with fire throughout the years, helping build a prescribed fire program, first on the HMNF and then at the regional level. He helped form the Eastern Area Interagency Type 2 Incident Management Team (IMT) in Region 9. He has served on the IMT in Operations or Incident Commander (IC) roles throughout the life of the IMT and currently serve as the primary IC. He is currently qualified in many operations and command roles, including Incident Commander Type 2 and Prescribed Burn Boss Type 2.

He continues to have a passion for building quality IMTs in the Eastern Area. The HMNF was forced to manage a highly complex incident on his district, the Hughes Lake Fire, without having an IMT readily available to respond. The incident was a 5,800-acre crown fire with structure loss. Fortunately, Minnesota sent one of their IMTs to provide assistance, and that started a decade-long journey to strengthen incident management in the Upper Midwest.

Steven has a teenage son and remarried in October. Being outdoors has always been his passion, and he has been thankful that he was hired by the Forest Service 28 years ago as a permanent Coop student while still seeking his B.S. in forest watershed management from the University of Arizona. He enjoys



Steven Goldman prepares to conduct a fire reconnaissance as an Incident Commander Team 2 in 2017 on the Coolwater Complex on the Nez Perce National Forest in Idaho. (Courtesy photo by Catherine Koele, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources)

many outdoors activities, including downhill skiing, snowmobiling, hiking, drag racing his mustang, and even cutting firewood. “However, firefighting has always been one of my passions, and I get paid for it!” he says.

What are some of the challenges for the wildland fire program in your state/agency?

The struggle within the U.S. Forest Service is to treat the “right” acres to improve our capability to stop wildfires and benefit our fire-adapted ecosystems. Fuels treatment is the foundational defense for catastrophic wildfire and places our firefighters in locations where they have a much higher chance of success. In other words, the proverbial fire line should be built years or decades in advance of the fire we predict.

How has your job changed since the Cohesive Strategy and the development of the Northeast Regional Action Plan?

The Strategy and Plan have helped communicate the need to act and treat now, and to do so across the landscape. The Forest Service is elevating our game to share stewardship across jurisdictional boundaries. The U.S. Forest Service Northeastern Area and our national forests want to connect the dots of our fuels treatments across the landscape with our partners.

In your agency, what are the key issues related to improving wildfire outcomes?

Changing the culture within the agency that inhibits our use of fire on the landscape as well as the mechanical treatment of fuels, including commercial timber harvest. The mindset that even standard forest management actions could cause significant environmental impacts, unless proven otherwise through exhaustive NEPA analysis, has limited our treatment of hazardous fuels. To make significant progress on improving wildfire outcomes, we must change the base fuels conditions we are dealing with. Putting our highly skilled firefighters and aviators in situations with unacceptable hazardous fuels conditions just can’t continue!

What are you and your agency doing to help communities live with wildfire?

We are trying to use every tool in the toolbox, including sharing stewardship of the land across jurisdictional lines. This means the U.S. Forest Service Northeastern Area and our national forests working hand in hand with States and private landowners to treat our landscape in a coordinated manner. This will improve our wildfire response and protect whole communities in the future. Part of this effort includes working with all of our States to complete a regionwide risk assessment that is already underway.

What advice do you have for people or communities that are interested in engaging with Region 9 and the Northeastern Area as part of their wildfire risk planning or fire adaptation work?

Call or stop by your local national forest or Northeastern Area Field Office. We have technical experts who can assist you or point you in the right direction depending on your needs. Be aware we may recommend cutting and/or burning in your backyard to reduce hazardous fuels!!

What advice do you have for our readers who are working to increase public acceptance of prescribed burning?

Start small. Implement a few burns, or use sites from a nearby cooperator, and use them as examples as you work with the public. Personal site visits, video, or pictures are great tools to dispel fears and misconceptions. I implemented a prescribed burn around my Ranger Station in Michigan, so when people came for public meetings, we could literally walk them out the door and show them what a forest looks like after a prescribed fire.

Can you describe one of the most interesting fire adaptation or restoration projects you've encountered in your career?

Restoring forest stand-replacing fire into the jack pine ecosystem in the northern portion of Lower Michigan on the Huron-Manistee National Forest. This had a twofold objective of reducing hazardous fuels in a fuel type prone to crown fire and creating habitat for fire-adapted wildlife species, including the endangered Kirtland's warbler. The area in question was also the site of the Mack Lake fire from 1980. This fire was an escaped prescribed fire that took the life of a Forest Service firefighter and destroyed 44 structures. Needless to say, it took a lot of work to begin using fire in this area and fuel type after the tragedy. More details of this project can be found on the Lake States Fire Science Consortium website in the 2014 [Maple Ridge](#) prescribed burn webinar.

What should our readers know about your state's priorities related to landscape restoration and/or community fire adaptation?

The Forest Service priority is to treat the highest risk acres within and around our national forests and work cooperatively with our States to do the same thing. This includes working with private landowners. We call this shared stewardship!

What are you most excited about working on in 2018/2019?

Continuing to work with the States, Region 9 national forests, and the Northeastern Area to expand our fuel treatment across boundaries and the landscape. We are one of the most productive geographic areas in the country for use of prescribed fire and timber harvest to manage our landscape. We are positioned well as partners to keep building our programs.

What's been the most exciting wildland fire development during your career?

There have been many. Most have been related to improving our firefighter safety. From developing staff rides (tactical field trips) to building leadership skills, to increasing our use of emergency medical responders on the fire line. However, the area where I see the greatest improvement in wildland firefighting is with the reduction of accidents and fatalities in our wildland fire aviation program. The improvements to our air tanker and helicopter fleets have been many fold, and compared to the 1990s when I started, we have improved dramatically. Every firefighter's spirits are raised when aviation assets come to help from logistics, suppression, reconnaissance, or medevac. Improving our safety margin for our flight crews is a path we need to keep going down.

Can you tell us about someone who has influenced your thinking regarding wildfire management?

There have been so many people who have influenced me throughout my career from a first-year firefighter to now working on Incident Management Teams. My first supervisor, Mark South, taught me to fight fire with fire. I carry that with me today and prefer to light my fire before the wildfire starts. I like unfair fights, and I prefer the upper hand against a wildfire.