



ARIZONA FORESTRY ROLLING OUT INNOVATIVE FIREFIGHTER LOCATING AND ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM

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Forestry and Fire Management



This fire season, the Arizona Department of Forestry and Fire Management deploys a modern wildland firefighter accountability and response system to better equip the agency's firefighters while out in the field, with the goal of keeping them safe.

Over the next few months, six of DFFM's 13 wildland fire hand crews will carry and test new field support and safety devices called DropBlocks, or GPS tracking and locating systems. More often than not, crews work in very remote areas with limited to no cell phone service so these tracking systems provide another layer of communication and accountability.

"These devices will provide Wildland Firefighters with a more collaborative and communicated tactical effort. Such advances will lead to extinguishing wildfires more efficiently and effectively, and help reduce tragic line of duty deaths, like my husband's," said Juliann Ashcraft, wife of Andrew Ashcraft, fallen Granite Mountain Interagency Hotshot.

These tracking and communications systems use Iridium Satellite, not standard radio or cellular services and can coordinate up-to-the-minute, GPS location data and provide real time data transmissions to agency or incident overhead. With DropBlocks, and through real time data, it is possible for DFFM to more precisely track crew movement and crew locations on wildland fire incidents.

Ashcraft continued, "By implementing this new technology, tragedies similar to Yarnell Hill will not have to be repeated in the future. It is imperative to us that lessons be learned from the tragic loss of the GMIHC, and that the deaths of my husband and friends drive profound and lasting change in how we approach wildland firefighting. This technology fulfills one of the large advances we've been fighting for. Let's continue the mission of improving Wildland Firefighter safety and situational awareness so that one more firefighter makes it home to their families safely. A big thank you to the state of Arizona for taking this important first step."

DFFM is one of a few wildland firefighting agencies in the country with this type of firefighter accountability system. These devices are products of RoGo, a Colorado-based company which develops state-of-the-art, satellite-based firefighter reporting systems. Overall, these devices provide another layer of safety for wildland fire crews and most importantly, they can potentially save lives.

"As the wife of a fallen wildland firefighter, I am grateful to RoGo Communications and the State of Arizona for partnering together to

implement cutting-edge technology to improve firefighter safety,” said Ashcraft.

“We know this will be the most important tool we have in our toolbox and we hope these locating units will help to prevent any more wildland fire tragedies from occurring. The application of these devices has been in the works for quite some time now and has really been a long time coming. Over the past few months, the department began an intense field evaluation of these units and as we progress into our fire season, we will gather data and feedback from the Crew Captains deployed with the DropBlocks units. If these devices prove successful, we will implement this system agency-wide to all of our hand crews and firefighting personnel,” said Chief Darrell Willis, DFFM’s Crews Supervisor.

“I am thankful that the Department of Forestry and Fire Management is on the cutting edge of firefighter safety. This is where it should be. Arizona should be leading, teaching and testing opportunities for bringing our wildland crews home. Improved communications is an important need. Let us not forget the importance of accountability too. This type of information will give a better picture of the fire and the needs of the crews, which will lead to better responses for the crews. We know the wildland community often work in remote areas. This equipment gives them eyes and ears on a fire, plus it lets incident command know exactly where crews, people, and equipment are located and that leads to better accountability. Incident Commands will not have to make educated 'guesses' on anything involving the fire. This is a full communication tool. With Arizona stepping up, this type of equipment will save lives. Then if a tragedy happens, we will be able to study what happened so changes can be made with accurate information,” said Deborah Pflingston, mother of Andrew Ashcraft.

For years, the department has been exploring ways to increase crew safety and enhance communication between firefighters and overhead. If crew testing proves successful, DFFM plans to distribute the DropBlocks to all of the agency’s wildland fire hand crews and engine crews as well.

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