First Thoughts and Fire Protection in the Desert

Posted At : July 3, 2012 4:16 PM | Posted By : Erik Link
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Like a few of the other interns, I thought that fire protection with the National Park Service was all about the grand lodges, forests, wildfires, and keeping parks safe in the wildland urban interface. When I found out that I was going to be working at the Petrified Forest this summer doing fire protection, it sent a few jokes my way. Surely, the forest of *petrified* wood, located in the middle of the *desert*, would be safe from fires. Below is a photo of just one of the logs located here at the park.

Petrified Log

The jokes were fun, but in reality, there is more to fire protection in the Park Service than Smokey the Bear and wildfires. While wildfires are no joke, structural fire is a very real hazard throughout the Park Service, and here at PEFO. Part of the challenge here, as with many parks, is the remoteness and dependency on outside fire departments. Here at PEFO, if a structural fire were to occur, it will take the fire department at least 45 minutes to arrive – after the call is made. This fact makes fire prevention and emergency preparedness even more important.

I have been working on a few different projects the past few weeks. It is of great interest to the park to install automatic sprinklers in the buildings here for several reasons. The primary goal is to get protection in the visitor center and headquarters building, as well as the employee housing. The installation of these sprinklers will keep people safe from fire, and will also reduce the impact of a fire to the historic buildings, irreplaceable collections, and personal property. To move towards this goal, I have been working on a project description and scope of work to install these systems.

Last week, I was able to work with the Park Structural Fire Coordinator and perform the annual flow tests of all of the fire hydrants here at the park. This ensures that the hydrants are operating properly, and that the water supply remains adequate and reliable. The park has a nifty device that attaches to the hydrant and has a built-in pitot gauge which helps simplify the pressure reading process (see image below).

Hydrant Flow Test

Hydrant Flow Test

In the next few weeks, I hope to help the park with their annual building fire inspections to ensure that fire and life safety measures are being maintained and the buildings are safe.

On a different note, the monsoon season is here, and last week it rained for the first time in months. I am looking forward to seeing water flowing down the Puerco River that runs through the park. At the moment, it's hard to believe it's a river...