

Preserving Life and Serving Others in Southern Oregon



Photo by David Gibb | dgibbphoto.com

Working with Grayback Forestry is not for the faint of heart. Whether working on prescribed burn projects, managing wildfire suppression, or traveling around the nation to help with extreme conditions or disasters, a day with Grayback Forestry is an adventurous day, a hard day, but a day that you may never forget.

The company—now one of the largest wildfire suppression and forest restoration operations in the country—started in 1979 with a smokejumper and a portable sawmill in Cave Junction, Oregon. Today, Grayback has bases in Grants Pass (Merlin), Medford (White City), John Day, and Missoula, Montana. In addition to prescribed fire, wildfire suppression, forest restoration, and hazardous fuel reduction, Grayback Forestry also receives disaster calls and has been known to help with the aftermath of hurricanes, blizzards, and even space shuttle explosions.

Whether serving in our local forests, or setting up disaster camps across the country, Grayback Forestry is helping people—and the environment—each season of the year.

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“We preserve life and property—and also build character, which is core to who we are.”

-Sean Hendrix
Base Manager

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Working with Grayback Forestry is not for the faint of heart. “You never know what you could be doing,” says Sean Hendrix, the base manager for Grayback’s Grants Pass headquarters. Whether working on prescribed burn projects, managing wildfire suppression, or traveling around the nation to help with extreme conditions or disasters, a day with Grayback Forestry is an adventurous day, a hard day, but a day that you may never forget.

The company—now one of the largest wildfire suppression and forest restoration operations in the country—started in 1979 with a smokejumper and a portable sawmill in Cave Junction, Oregon. Later into the 80’s came a trickle of forestry contracts that led into prescribed burning operations. Without this sort of monitored fire, forests can become unhealthy for both animals and plants and grow into hazards for extreme fire. Which is why Grayback’s operations continue to be critical in Southern Oregon.

As Grayback Forestry grew, the company opened more offices around the Western United States. Today, Grayback has bases in Grants Pass (Merlin), Medford (White City), John Day, and Missoula, Montana. In addition to prescribed fire, wildfire suppression, forest restoration, and hazardous fuel reduction, Grayback Forestry also receives disaster calls and has been known to help with the aftermath of hurricanes, blizzards, and even space shuttle explosions. “Our crews are recognized as some of the best,” said Hendrix. “When people see a Grayback crew showing up, they know they’re getting a group of well-trained individuals, who can do pretty much any job.”

Even the recruiting process is more exciting than just an interview. Prospective employees must prove that they can keep up with the job’s physical requirements, and so the first step after applying to Grayback is the pack test. If candidates can hike three miles in under forty-five minutes (while carrying a forty-five-pound backpack), then they are eligible for a week of fire training. If they also complete that and still have a good attitude, they’re offered a job. “The job keeps you in great shape,” Hendrix points out. “And even if you’re not in perfect shape when you start, you’ll get there if you have a passion for what you’re doing.”

Of course, with any adventurous job, there are obvious challenges. Grayback employees have tales of hiking for hours, traveling to other parts of the country for weeks at a time, eating rations and not getting to shower for days. However, each of these stories comes with new friendships and bonding experiences with coworkers, who are soon family.

Not every job at Grayback is necessarily a firefighting position. Technological developments in the firefighting industry have the potential to help combat the most extreme fire seasons—from a distance. For example, the company began a drone program in 2020, which is managed by a couple of IT personnel and allows Grayback to survey challenging terrain from the sky. In addition, Grayback is expanding the use of interactive maps, GIS technology, and thermal imaging cameras (which pick up heat signatures even in low visibility).

Grayback employs close to 250 people full-time, though during the summer those numbers jump to 475. While not everyone necessarily has background in forestry; a simple passion for preserving the forests and fighting fires is the starting point for each employee. “You learn a lot at Grayback,” Hendrix adds, commenting on his thirty-one years with the company. “We preserve life and property—and also build character, which is core to who we are.”

Grayback offers all basic wildland firefighting courses—most done in-house—though some of RCC’s wildland fire courses are transferable. Employees also gain Commercial Driver’s License (CDL) certifications, Sawyer certifications (for chainsaw use), and heavy equipment operation licenses. Along with fire suppression related activities, Grayback specializes in forest restoration, including thinning, trail building, tree planting, and more.

Grayback Forestry proudly states its core values on its website: *To be united in the higher calling of people helping people by building a team that is willing to serve, rather than be served.* Whether serving in our local forests, or setting up disaster camps across the country, Grayback Forestry is helping people—and the environment—each season of the year.



Photo by David Gibb | dgibbphoto.com

A Grayback crew member manages a prescribed burn

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