FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Prescribed Fire Program Supervisor recognized for life-saving actions during California deployment

October 20, 2020 – Firefighters from a variety of agencies throughout the state, including Flagler County, regularly deploy to help fight wildland fires elsewhere in the country. It’s not very often, however, that they face a “historic and unprecedented” perfect storm of conditions that allowed 215,000 acres to burn in 24 hours – requiring leadership skills and experience to kick in to save the lives of the 11 people in one’s charge.

Flagler County’s unassuming Michael Orlando, prescribed fire program supervisor, was recognized at Monday’s regular meeting of the Board of County Commissioners for doing just that.

“(Historic and unprecedented)...These aren’t my words,” said Resiliency and Resource Stewardship Manager Tim Telfer, to whom Orlando reports, noting they are the words of a California forestry firefighter describing the conditions on September 8 at the “North Complex Fire,” north of Sacramento in the Plumas National Forest.

Telfer shared information from the official “Midday Update” on that day that detailed 45 mph winds carrying the fire to the tree crowns (tops). He showed a picture of Orlando atop a truck so he could get radio signal from a helicopter overhead. The message: the fire jumped the river in the valley below; the fire has grown to 1,000 acres in an hour; and, the fire will likely be there within 90 minutes.

Orlando, the “dozer boss” in charge of his crew of 11 and millions of dollars of equipment, and his field supervisor made the decision to go to a nearby safety zone – a 5-acre nearly cleared patch on the mountain top. Once there, Orlando stayed in “constant calm contact” as he gave instruction to cut the roots and push over as many trees as possible.

Crews would take refuge in their vehicles while the fire burned past them. Orlando was concerned about whether their oxygen would hold out.

“These flames are 200 feet,” Telfer said. “They are inside with the air conditioning running full bore, and they can’t keep up. It’s hot. And it’s loud. You can’t shout across to the person next to you. And they weren’t hit with the fire once – they were hit three times.”

Orlando, his crew, and his equipment all survived.
He didn’t say much during the meeting except that he was grateful for the experience, and to bring additional skills back to Flagler County.

What he shared after the meeting with a little prodding is that he used vacation days for his deployment, and that his wife, Ashley, is also a firefighter who was deployed to an equally harrowing southern California wildfire which “made things a little extra tense.”

“I didn’t really have time to worry – I had to stay focused,” Orlando said. “My experience kicked in.”

That experience includes 10 out-of-state deployments, and work on more than 400 separate, documented wildland fires.

“My motto? Seek more training,” Orlando said. “Be the best you can be every day.”

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