

Shari Downhill went from writing about wildfires to fighting them

By Susan Goracke of the *Daily Courier*



What's a woman journalist doing running a company that sends timber fallers out to fight wildland fires? When the woman is Shari Downhill, the answer is easy: She knows fires, she's business-savvy, and six years ago, she married a timber faller. "My first two husbands worked for the Forest Service, and I was around fire crews all the time," said Downhill, an Idaho native who began working after high school for the Forest Service as a fire lookout in the Sequoia National Forest near Bakersfield, Calif. Later, as a single mom with three children, she earned a journalism degree from Humboldt State University in Arcata, Calif.

Downhill's first assignment was covering the Payette National Forest for the McCall (Idaho) Star News. While there in 1994, she wrote about the South Canyon Fire, which killed 14 experienced firefighters — Montana smokejumpers and Oregon hotshots — on Colorado's Storm King Mountain in western Colorado. While writing for the Sonora (Calif.) Union Democrat, she covered land-use issues and Yosemite National Park.

During her 15 years as a journalist, Downhill wrote stories about wildland fires, timber harvests, water quality issues on public lands and livestock grazing. She covered federal land management agencies such as the Forest Service, the National Park Service and the Bureau of Land Management, and state fire-fighting agencies. But it wasn't until she met and married husband No. 3, Ken Downhill of Grants Pass that she discovered a problem with the way many wildland fires were being fought. Too often, incompetent timber fallers — Downhill calls them "fire chasers" — were being dispatched to work fire lines with equipment they weren't trained on. Meanwhile, experienced, career timber fallers were sitting at home without work, she said. "That's the way it's always worked down here," Shari Downhill said, explaining that logging companies traditionally lay off timber fallers during fire season.

When Downhill moved to Grants Pass, she came up with an idea to solve the problem. In 2000, she started Northwest Timber Fallers as a labor cooperative for commercial timber fallers. But the group's structure wasn't working. By that time, Downhill was the Medford Mail Tribune's business reporter. Through her job, she discovered several local resources for starting a business: Sowac's business readiness program and *Roger Harding's small business management class*. Both helped her launch Northwest Timber

Fallers as a private business. No longer a journalist, Downhill now is president and chief executive officer of Northwest Timber Fallers, a fire contracting company based on New Hope Road just south of Grants Pass. She maintains a growing roster of about three dozen timber fallers throughout Oregon and Washington, and sends them out on fires in most Western states. Soon, she hopes to expand rosters to include timber fallers in California, Idaho, Montana, Colorado and the Southwest. "Most of our guys have between 15 and 30 years timber falling experience," she explained. "We verify their background, give them additional training, then send them out in a team with a truck and all their equipment." The company provides timber fallers' insurance and guarantees their experience. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, commercial timber fallers' work is the most dangerous work in America.

Northwest Timber Fallers also contracts with the Forest Service and the Oregon Department of Transportation to teach employees to improve their chain saw skills. Downhill noted she could not have created her business without help. "We received a lot of support and mentorship from Mike Wheelock (president of Merlin-based Grayback Forestry)," she said. "He tried to help steer us away from potholes in the road." And she points out, "This is our timber fallers' secondary line of work. They work for logging contractors as their main job. But now, our timber fallers have more consistent, year-round work." Downhill also serves as executive director of the National Wildfire Suppression Association's Professional Timber Faller Chapter, which she founded in 2002 to provide organized representation and education in fighting wildfires for commercial timber fallers on a national scale. She also is pursuing a master's degree in adult education and workplace training at Oregon State University. So far, Downhill's roster of timber fallers is all-male. "I haven't had any female applications, and I have my eyes open," she said. "I've read incredible stories about women who are timber fallers, and I certainly would support it if I found any."

Reach reporter Susan Goracke at 474-3725 or sgoracke@thedailycourier.com