

Big sprinkler system



STEVE DOWELL/CHRONICLE

Volunteers, mostly Mormons, lay irrigation pipe to carry water pumped from the Madison River to fire lines around West Yellowstone.

Volunteers construct 'wet' fire line

By ELIZABETH LADEN
Chronicle Staff Writer

WEST YELLOWSTONE — Spirits in this small resort town rose Saturday after more than 100 Mormon farmers and college students from Idaho rode to the rescue with miles of irrigation pipe to build a wet buffer between town and the North Fork fire, burning a mile to the east in Yellowstone Park.

In just over 24 hours, some 125 volunteers laid farm irrigation pipes around two sides of West Yellowstone, drawing water from the Madison River more than a mile away to sprinkle on areas of town nearest the fire.

The modern-day bucket brigade was applauded Saturday at a community information meeting on the the 118,800-acre North Fork fire by Park Ranger Joe Halladay, who said that the water would slow the fire if it approaches town.

The volunteers received permission from the Park Service to use chain saws to clear trees in the path of the irrigation lines, to blast the river with dynamite and to haul pipe into the park with their trucks.

Permission was needed because the park

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but they didn't," said Dean Seely, one of the volunteer organizers. "Our efforts will give the fire a harder time. We sleep easier knowing there's some wet wood out there."

The volunteers are mainly members of the Mormon Church and were called to defend West Yellowstone by Clyde Seely, a former church bishop and local businessman who owns several motels, restaurants, a gas station and a travel promotion company.

Around 25 of the volunteers are West Yellowstone residents, some of whom are not

Idaho, activated the church's emergency preparedness communications system Thursday. Church members respond to emergencies by telephoning key church members who pass the call for help down an organized chain of command.

Sixty-five Idaho farmers donated the pipes and other equipment, and arrived in West Yellowstone at 9 a.m. Friday to install the system.

Another 65 volunteers, all Rick's College students from Rexburg, Idaho, arrived Saturday to help finish the job.

On Friday, volunteers laid 1½ miles of mainline irrigation pipe in a double line from the river to the east border of West Yellowstone.

The sprinkler lines parallel the town's south and east borders and are laid out in four to seven parallel sections that extend up to a half mile from town. A diesel pump pulls the water from the river and a backup pump is available, Lee said.

Some volunteers said they were glad to help fight the fire because they were sick of breathing the smoke that lays in Idaho valleys every morning as far away as Idaho Falls, Idaho, 120 miles south of West Yellowstone.