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News Release

Capacity Building

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West Mountain Volunteer Fire Department donates engines to Gray Volunteer Fire Department

MARION, Texas — West Mountain Volunteer Fire Department (Upshur County) donated two Type II fire engines to Gray Volunteer Fire Department (Marion County) in a direct donation through the Texas A&M Forest Service’s Helping Hands program.

Winter Storm Uri in 2021 caused catastrophic freeze damage to Gray Volunteer Fire Department’s fire engines. Because of an annual operating budget of only \$6,000 from Marion County, Fire Chief Don Grant and Gray VFD members have been trying to restore the department’s emergency response capabilities.

West Mountain VFD weathered Uri well and recently developed a long-term plan to upgrade its firefighting fleet, making the donation a good fit for both.

The two engines served the Henderson Fire Department (Rusk County) through the 1980s and eventually made their way to West Mountain where they served as that department’s primary engines until a newer pumper and pumper-tender were obtained within the past decade through county ESD funding and a Rural Volunteer Fire Department Assistance Program (HB 2604) grant.

“Henderson Fire Department helped our volunteer fire department out many years ago, so we wanted to pay it forward to another volunteer fire department in need,” said West Mountain Fire Chief Josh Bardwell. “Chief Grant and his department have historically served their citizens selflessly with minimal funding, so there was no question that this donation was the right thing to do.”

“We have always done the best we can with what we’ve got” Grant said. “These trucks may be older, but they are a big upgrade over what we had, and we are very grateful for West Mountain.”

Texas A&M Forest Service Regional Fire Coordinator Matt Burnett worked with both volunteer fire departments over several months to get the engines transferred to their new home. “This is what the Helping Hands program is all about, fire departments helping fire departments. It is also a fine example of how our various capacity building programs complement each other. One department can purchase a new truck with a grant while another department receives a well-maintained and equipped pre-owned engine to put back into service,” Burnett said.

Since 1997, the Helping Hands program has been providing volunteer fire departments with much needed equipment through generous donations made by fire departments, businesses, cities, local governments and individuals. The success wouldn’t have been possible without the support of the Texas

Legislature through passage of HB 680 during the 75th legislative session, that provides liability relief for donors.

