

Film spotlights need to protect firefighters



Mary Beth Wusk, a deputy director at NASA Langley Research Center in Hampton, Va., is working with a team of NASA material experts to design a new emergency shelter for wildland firefighters. Photo/NASA

By Kurtis Alexander, San Francisco Chronicle

As Hollywood rolls out a blockbuster drama about the 19 firefighters killed after crawling inside their protective emergency shelters during a raging 2013 wildfire, the federal government is wrapping up a real-life bid to improve the nation's standard-issue fire shelter – by going space-age.

Much of the redesign is being done by a group of NASA engineers, and their work couldn't come at a more opportune time, with the deadly Wine Country fires just the latest in an escalating trend of wildland blazes tearing up the West.

The engineers were already busy building heat shields for space missions four years ago when they heard of the unprecedented deaths of Arizona's Granite Mountain Hotshots,

portrayed in the new film “Only the Brave.” The NASA engineers immediately decided to volunteer their expertise.

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