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(Neb.)-Special Report-Lawmakers Preparing For 'New Normal' Of Mega Fire Seasons



By: Dennis and Kathi Brown Posted at: 02/17/2013 07:44 AM

File Photo

By GRANT SCHULTE

Associated Press

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) - Nebraska lawmakers are rethinking the state's approach to wildfires in the wake of massive summer blazes that threatened property, strained local budgets and disrupted businesses that rely on tourism.

The push to add firefighting resources in the most remote corners of the state comes as forestry officials warn that Nebraska may face a "new normal" of massive wildfires.

Nebraska will likely see larger and more intense "mega fires" in coming years for a variety of reasons, said Scott Josiah, director of the Nebraska Forest Service in Lincoln. Heat, drought and climate change play a role, he said, but so does the spread of eastern red cedar trees - a pine with needles and resin that are both highly flammable.

"These fires are just so much bigger than what we've faced before," Josiah said. "We're in a new normal, and fire departments will need more equipment and resources."

Lawmakers will confront the issue in a committee hearing this week. Sen. Al Davis of Hyannis has introduced a bill that would add new resources to the state's firefighting arsenal. Davis will present his proposal, the Wildfire Control Act of 2013, to the Legislature's Natural Resources Committee on Friday.

The bill, which has eight co-sponsors, would require the Nebraska Forest Service to contract with private companies to station single-engine air tankers near Chadron and Valentine for firefighting. The agency would also have to thin state forests to reduce the wildfire risk, expand its training programs for residents and volunteer firefighters, and create an incident-management team that would help respond to future wildfires.

Last year, emergency responders relied on a single-engine plane based in Hot Springs, S.D. Larger tankers flew in from elsewhere. Bill supporters argue that stationing planes full-time in Valentine and Chadron during the fire season would give them extra time to protect lives and property - and keep Nebraska from competing with

other states.

The single-engine planes can carry between 600 and 800 gallons of flame retardant, water or foam - not nearly enough to extinguish a large blaze by themselves. Emergency crews use them to extinguish fires in hard-to-reach areas, such as canyons or thick forests, and to soak grass quickly to keep flames from advancing.

"This last summer, the fires just got out of control so quickly," said Davis, who represents a large swath of fire-scarred northern Nebraska. "It was very dry, hot and windy, and with the resources that were available, it took a long time to get the tankers in. And thank God they did. But we probably need to be a little more aggressive with that in the future."

Davis said he expects the legislation would cost the state about \$1.7 million for the air tankers, volunteer training and surplus firefighting equipment.

Nebraska experienced 1,570 wildfires last year that burned a total of 786 square miles - an expanse nearly seven times the size of Omaha, according to the Nebraska Emergency Management Agency. Agency spokeswoman Jodie Fawl said 98 percent of the wildfires were caused by lightning strikes. The combined cost of ground-level firefighting, aerial suppression and mutual aid from other states cost Nebraska more than \$11 million.

Many local departments had to dip into their cash reserves as they raced from one wildfire to another, causing their fuel and equipment-maintenance costs to soar. Firefighters in Thedford spent an estimated \$10,000 on fuel alone, compared to \$1,500 in a typical summer, and responded to about 40 fire calls when they normally receive eight or 10. Local crews in Brown County blew through their \$155,000 annual firefighting budget.

The fires also took an economic toll on Nebraska that isn't measured as easily, Davis said. Most of the volunteer firefighters hold regular jobs or own businesses, and some were forced to leave their work unattended for more than a week. Canoeing businesses along the Niobrara River in northern Nebraska were forced to close as flames roared through the river valley. Several fires came within a few miles of Lake McConaughy, a tourism hotspot in western Nebraska.

The Valentine Rural Fire Department struggled all summer with fires that dipped into canyons in the Sandhills that were too treacherous for ground crews, said Chief Terry Engles.

"You had to wait until they came out," Engles said. "They were too steep and deep. It's dangerous to get down in them. You just can't do it."

Engles said the rugged terrain and valleys in the Sandhills also delayed ground-crew response times, which allowed the fires to spread.

"You've got to understand, it might take us a long time," he said. "Cross-country, the distance to a fire might not seem too far. But it might take an hour. That's just too long. An airplane can be there in 10 minutes."

Federal forestry officials in northwest Nebraska are increasingly concerned that they'll see a repeat of the fires that scorched thousands of acres of pastureland and wooded areas, said Jane Darnell, a supervisor for the Nebraska National Forests and Grasslands. Darnell said persistent drought conditions keep grass dry and prevent cattle from grazing, which helps thin the vegetation.

"We haven't had a big snow season this year, so we're going to be dependent on spring moisture," Darnell said.

Brian Daunt, the fire-management officer for the Nebraska National Forest and Grasslands, said his federal agency has provided grant money to a local airport board in Chadron in anticipation that the state will station at least one plane in the area. The money will cover the cost of a mixing system for flame retardant and water and

pumps to fill the plane, he said.

"With a lot of the fires now, we have so much fuel on the ground that they'll burn extremely hot," Daunt said. "We don't always have a way to get to them on the ground. The planes can definitely buy time to get ground forces in, and save property that we might not otherwise have been able to."

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The bill is LB634