

# THE RURAL FIREFIGHTER

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Nebraska Forest Service

[www.nfs.unl.edu](http://www.nfs.unl.edu)

## Where Are All the Firefighters?

A few years ago at the Nebraska State Volunteer Firefighters Association (NSVFA) Conference, Jim Egr took some of his time to do something that has stayed with me ever since. Jim is NSVFA's legal advisor and in spite of the fact that he's a lawyer, if you haven't met him, you should. Jim isn't shy to say what needs to be said, and if I remember right, this was one of his "pound on the podium" moments that he nailed dead on.

Jim asked everyone, around 250 people, to stand up. He then asked those over age 70 to sit down, and about 10 percent did so (to a round of applause for their service, by the way). Then he asked those over 60 to do the same and a sizeable number sat down. He continued, ten years at a time, until just those firefighters under age 30 were standing. As you might already expect, only about a dozen people were standing.

Jim's point was that this group of firefighters were the future of the NSVFA and the fire service in general, and their small numbers should be a wake-up call for everyone in the room. Are you seeing something similar happening in your own fire department? If the average age of your volunteers keeps going up and the "young pups" are in their 40s, that should be cause for some concern.

And action.



So what are you doing to attract new members? Before you jump into recruitment, do you know what types of members you need? You may be missing some very talented people in your community if firefighting ability is the only way a member can contribute to the department! Is there someone in the community who excels with computers? As a member, could they help with reporting needs, developing new posters or flyers and keeping printed

information lists current? Do you have a hard time with response during the day? How about focused recruiting on the people you know will be in town during daylight hours? And also, do you have an explorer program in your department to introduce those young

people to the fire service?

The other side of the coin, of course, is hanging on to the firefighters you have. Today's membership is much different than it was 20 or even just 10 years ago. There are so many demands on the pool of potential volunteers, so if you're asking for their time, effort and dedication, you have to give them a reason to want to be there. For some, just belonging to a relatively exclusive social group—the fire department—is enough, but make sure you don't forget about these folks or take them for granted. It isn't a waste of time to encourage the social atmosphere of the fire department. That doesn't mean throwing free

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With an interim legislative study set to take place this year, prescribed (rx) fire is a hot topic right now. One point that will likely be discussed is a perceived need that the fire service should better understand how to manage rx burns. While I think it's important that a fire chief be able to interpret a burn plan, managing rx burning is not something I'm convinced should be obligated to the fire department.

This responsibility originates in Nebraska Statute 81-520, where it states the open burning ban may only be waived by the "...fire chief of a local fire department or his or her designee..." Even though a burn plan isn't statutorily required for all burning, range management burning ("controlled application of fire to existing vegetative matter on land utilized for grazing") requires a burn plan to be reviewed by the fire chief prior to issuing a permit. No standard burn plan format exists, but the open burning statute (printed on the reverse side of the burn permit) includes ten mandatory factors for all plans. Focus on these when presented with a permit request.

## Fire Behavior Factors

Every wildfire student knows the ingredients of fire behavior – fuels, weather and topography. These factors are also important to rx burns.

Choosing the right combination can help ensure fire stays in the burn unit.

## Fuels

Burn plans must include a description of the fuels present on the burn unit *and* adjacent areas. Note fuel height (how tall is the grass?), load (CRP or a grazed pasture?), continuity (any natural breaks in the fuel?) and arrangement (did winter snows pack the grass down or is it standing straight up?). This will impact control lines needed as well as the number of people needed to conduct the burn. Control lines to mineral soil are the best choice, but many times aren't realistic. Mowed lines are used often but don't actually create a fuel break, so make sure the plan calls for additional personnel. Raking can greatly improve mowed lines by changing fuel load and arrangement.

Fuel moisture should also be considered although it may not be listed. One tool that can help is the Nebraska Fire Danger Index. The Index, located on the NFS webpage ([www.nfs.unl.edu](http://www.nfs.unl.edu)), is generated from satellite data of the relative greenness of fuel combined with forecast information. The Index is updated twice a day, every day. While it may not be perfect, it does provide another clue.

## Weather

In general, temperature should be 40-80 degrees, relative humidity 25-60 percent and wind speeds 5-15 mph. The firefighter might, as a result of training, automatically prefer slower winds, but light and variable winds can make a fire less predictable or lead to a burn that fails to meet objectives. Burns conducted with low temps and high humidity could also create a burn

that fails to meet management goals, while burning on the high end can lead to intense, out of control fire behavior.

These are not hard, fast numbers. Other considerations may dictate "bumping" the ranges slightly. Often, a burn boss may burn at the low end when completing burnouts for control lines or when high energy fuels are present. Higher winds may be needed to carry fire through sparse fuel, but ask a lot of questions if a wind speed beyond 20 is part of the prescription. The need for conditions outside expected norms should be noted, so discuss any concerns with the burn boss. Also, verify that the burn boss plans to monitor weather throughout the burn.

## Topography

Slope impacts fire behavior by modifying wind and fuel conditions – whether it's a two mile hill in the Rockies or a 200 foot hill in the Bohemian Alps. South facing slopes will be drier, causing fire to run up the slope. Control lines placed at the top of any slope should generate a discussion of how to reduce fire behavior near the line.

## Additional Factors

### Address/location

Verify the burn is within your fire district! Recently, a person unable to secure a burn permit through their local fire chief simply went to the next fire district. The neighboring chief, as many of us would, took the person at their word and didn't check the address.

### Map and access

The plan must include a burn area map showing individual units as well as natural and constructed control lines. If not shown, firing patterns, safety zones and best access should be discussed.

### Contingencies

In many plans, the local fire department

is listed as a backup resource. The moral of the story is that fire departments may want to limit the daily number of permits issued. Technically, contingency resources are part of the plan. If contingency resources become unavailable (a burn out of control, rescue call, structure fire, etc.),



every burn listing that resource as a contingency is now “out of prescription” and should be stopped. That creates a need to communicate with burn bosses who may have fire on the ground.

## Resources

There is no magic number of resources to have on scene, but two or three people cannot safely burn even moderate-sized areas. The burn boss should have enough people and resources on hand (not contingency resources) to shut the fire down if needed. Figures most often mentioned are a *minimum* of six to 10 people with additional personnel needed as complexity increases.

## Smoke impacts

State law specifically requires the plan to list roads or homes that may be impacted by smoke. Pay particular attention to wind direction if the burn is near an airport, retirement center, large highway or other habitations sensitive to smoke.

## Post-fire monitoring

The area should be monitored until the fire is out.

## Burn permits

Only *written* permits on the State Fire Marshal’s form meet statutory requirements. Burn permits can be valid for up to (and no more than) 30 days, so there should be no reason to give a permit over the phone. The statute also says the fire department may “...adopt and promulgate rules and regulations listing the conditions acceptable for issuing a permit...” so the fire department may choose to issue burn permits at a specified time and place only. Make sure the policy is publicized and applied equally.

One side note. The statute specifically states “Anyone burning in such jurisdiction when the open burning ban has been waived shall notify the fire department of his or her intention to burn.” Our interpretation of this is that a landowner with a burn permit valid for up to 30 days must still notify the fire department on the day(s) they intend to burn. That is the one piece of the permitting process that could be done over the phone.

It’s impossible to cover everything in this article, so if you have questions, please feel free to get in touch with NFS or the Fire Marshals Office. Even though a burn plan isn’t always required, it’s a very good idea for every rx burn, not just range management burns. Burn plan use is catching on, so if the chief hasn’t seen one yet, it’s becoming more likely he or she will. Take some time to read Nebraska Statute 81-520. This law, as well as many more dealing with Nebraska fire departments, can be found in the NFS publication “Selected Laws Pertaining to Nebraska Firefighters and Fire Departments,” commonly known as the “Blue Book.” It’s available on the NFS website.

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beers to everyone after a meeting or call, but it may mean hanging around the firehouse for a while, if for no other reason than just to get to know your people better. And since the fire department is competing with a volunteers’ time at home, make sure all of your events are designed to *include* the families of your volunteers.

Others may want the opportunity to prove themselves. They want to be given a project of their own or the chance to help with one. When it’s done, don’t forget to recognize the effort.

Here are a few more ideas to maintain the volunteers you have:

- Treat everyone equally
- Keep everyone informed
- Provide quality training
- Listen to their ideas
- Recognize their achievements
- Lead by example
- ...and many more.

We’re only scratching the surface of this topic. If you’re looking for more information, the National Volunteer Fire Council has produced a publication full of tips — “Retention and Recruitment for the Volunteer Emergency Services.” It’s available on their website at [www.nvfc.org](http://www.nvfc.org).



***Nugget of the Day***  
Morale is the greatest single factor in successful wars.

– Dwight D. Eisenhower

## ***Calendar of Events***

Sept. 19	Frenchman Mutual Aid Fire School, Palisade
Sept. 20-23	Arson Conference Hastings
Oct. 14-16	NSVFA Conference Chadron

## A Firefighter's Role



Many people aren't well informed about a firefighter's role in their community or fire district. They know firefighters answer calls for help, but little else. Firefighter's

often don't do enough to cure this, and in some locations, may actually distance themselves when not answering alarms. Whatever the reason, here are some things to consider.

You are a firefighter because of the people in your community. They enacted the ordinances and laws to form city fire departments and rural fire districts. The people built your fire station. They purchased the fire trucks and equipment you use. You use their tax exemption number to purchase items. They provide workers' compensation coverage and term life insurance. Under Workers' Compensation law 48-115, you are an employee of the city, rural fire district or both. You exist because of the people.

You may say "Well, I'm a volunteer!"

You are only a volunteer once. That is when you decided to join the fire department. From that point on, you live to the standards of the constitution and bylaws of the fire department. You are governed by local ordinances, state statutes and applicable federal laws. You have set yourself out as an expert in your field.

You need to inform and educate the community about what you do. You need to teach them how to protect themselves, their families and property from fire. FIRE PREVENTION—your job is to save lives and protect property. Once the alarm sounds, it's too late! The fire has already happened. Even before you get to the station, you have suffered loss.

It's time to become proactive. Are you asking yourself "Where do I start?" Try these suggestions:

- Think about fire prevention activities at the county fair and other events.
- People spend time in parks during the summer. Consider taking Smokey Bear to your local or state park for a fire prevention visit.

- Remind people that every 16 minutes there is a fire-related injury in the United States.
- Contact schools to get on the fall fire prevention program agendas.
- Remind people to avoid driving vehicles in stubble fields.
- Fire prevention poster contests can be held any time of year for any age group.
- Smokey's 66th birthday will be August 9th. Make plans for a birthday party.

The benefits of fire prevention activities are clear. Fire prevention:

Takes place at your convenience.

Educates people.

Generates lasting public relations.

Builds programs for the future based on knowledge and experience.

Saves lives and property.

Saves tax dollars.

WHY DO YOU BRUSH YOUR TEETH?

To prevent cavities!

IT'S PREVENTION!!!

***'Sandy's Corner' has not disappeared. She'll be back next issue.***

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