

Nebraska looks to join states in fighting wildfires



Smoke and fire rise from north-central Nebraska wildfires July 24, 2012.

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Nebraska is on the cusp of joining forces with Colorado, Wyoming and the Dakotas to help fight rural wildfires.

A bill headed to Gov. Dave Heineman would allow Nebraska to join the Great Plains Interstate Fire Compact, an agreement that lets member states share their firefighters and equipment in an emergency without going to the federal government. Kansas is considering a similar proposal.

Pooling the states' resources could lead to faster response times in the most remote and hard-to-reach areas of

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state's approach to wildfires in the wake of massive summer blazes that threatened property, strained lo...

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Nebraska, said Sen. Al Davis, the bill's sponsor. Nebraska lawmakers gave the bill (LB961) final approval Friday with a 47-0 vote.

The bill was introduced two years after massive wildfires swept through central and western Nebraska.

Firefighters struggled to battle a blaze near Valentine that dipped into canyons in the Sandhills and overwhelmed local crews. Similar fires raged in northwest Nebraska and crossed into South Dakota.

"The South Dakota fire resources are so great up there in the Black Hills," said Davis, a Hyannis rancher and former volunteer firefighter. "To get those down to help us out rapidly could really make a difference. If we had that ability in 2012, I don't think we would have had nearly as much loss."

Nebraska saw 1,634 wildfires in 2012 that burned a total of 813 square miles — an expanse more than six times the size of Omaha, according to the Nebraska Forest Service. The number plummeted to 603 fires last year, burning about 19 square miles, but parts of central and southern Nebraska are still suffering from a severe drought.

Those dry grasslands and forest create the potential for more large wildfires, said Nebraska State Forester Scott Josiah. Another concern is the rapid spread of eastern red cedar trees, which produce highly flammable needles and resin.

The compact could have helped crews respond faster to another big fire, which started in Sheridan County, said Jim Strain, assistant chief of operations for the South Dakota Division of Wildland Fire. The blaze, dubbed the Wellnitz fire, burned 120 square miles, including 44 square miles in South Dakota's Pine Ridge Indian Reservation.

Strain said South Dakota crews watched the fire burn in Nebraska for 96 hours but couldn't help until it crossed their border. Meanwhile, Nebraska's volunteer crews were stretched thin because of fires in nearby Dawes and Sioux counties.

"If we could have been down in Sheridan County early on, even 48 hours earlier, it wouldn't have just benefited South Dakota," Strain said. "It would have helped those Nebraska ranchers as well."

The current setup requires Nebraska to go through the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Under the compact, Nebraska could call directly to the other member states for a faster response.

"It gives us faster access to resources from out of state," said Gering Fire Chief Jay Templar. "It opens up the possibility that if the need is there, as it was in 2012, that they may be able to pull that trigger a little quicker."

If it's approved, Heineman would designate a state official to oversee the compact. A local fire department's request for help from another state would require state approval, as would requests made by other states.

Templar said the Great Plains compact is also easier for rural departments staffed by volunteers. The federal government requires departments to keep crews and equipment at a fire scene for up to 14 days — a long wait for part-time firefighters with regular jobs.

By contrast, the Plains compact only requires a 48-hour commitment. It also gives Nebraska firefighters the opportunity to battle even larger fires in places like the Colorado mountains and South Dakota's Black Hills, Templar said.

The Great Plains compact is one of eight multi-state agreements throughout the country, and Jerry Stilmock, a lobbyist for the Nebraska State Volunteer Firefighters Association. Stilmock said all the other compact members have their own statewide fire-suppression forces, while Nebraska relies on

"We don't have a state team like South Dakota, North Dakota, Colorado or Wyoming," Stilmock said. "That to me seems to be all the more of a reason why Nebraska should be part of the Great Plains compact."
