

THE RURAL FIREFIGHTER

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Nebraska Forest Service

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Prescribed Fire Safety

I had a call from a fellow firefighter the other day. He expressed some concerns about a prescribed burn being conducted by a fire department. That a fire department was administering a burn wasn't his question since it's common in eastern Nebraska. His question was in regard to the weather conditions during the burn.

According to the National Weather Service, conditions at Lincoln that day were: maximum

temperature 68 degrees, average wind speed 18 mph out of the south with gusts to 39 mph, relative humidity 29 percent and clear skies. The Rangeland Fire Danger Index for the day was extreme, the highest possible category. Wind speed was obviously the driving factor behind the elevated index.



What are appropriate conditions for administering a prescribed fire then? First, you might notice I never refer it as a "controlled burn." Is the fire really controlled after the match is lit? If the area is prepared properly, the fire should be *contained*, but since the fire is burning in a constantly changing environment, the word "controlled" is really not an accurate description. So, what is prescribed burning? One definition is: **The skillful application of fire under exacting conditions of weather and fuel in a predetermined area, to achieve specific results.** Let's break that definition down and pull out the important points.

"Skillful application" – In my opinion, this denotes that the person in charge has had sufficient formal training and experience to complete the burn safely. I also interpret that anyone assisting

with the burn has a minimum amount of formal fire behavior and prescribed fire training. By minimum amount, it's my opinion that should be a full day dedicated to fire behavior (such as the NWCG S-190 Intro to Fire Behavior) and another full day focused on prescribed burning.

"Under exacting conditions of weather and fuel" – Conditions will vary by site, but in general, temperatures should be 40-80 degrees, relative humidity 25-60 percent and wind speeds 5-15 mph. Burning at the low end of those conditions could create an incomplete, patchy burn that fails to meet management goals, while burning on the high end of the range can lead to intense, possibly dangerous, fire behavior that exceeds our capacity to control. Utilize available resources, such as the Rangeland Fire Danger Rating and daily fire behavior forecasts, to determine if the day planned for burning has the appropriate weather "window" and continue to monitor weather throughout the burn. Consider postponing a burn during frontal passage.

"In a predetermined area" – In my opinion, predetermined fuel breaks are the only things separating a prescribed fire from a wildland fire. Roads, plowed or green fields, mowed/disked lines, etc. can be utilized if they are of sufficient size. Tree rows are *not* proper fuel breaks, from either a control or a management standpoint.

"To achieve specific results" – Reducing hazardous forest fuels, increasing forage and

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improving wildlife habitat are valid reasons to utilize prescribed fire. Prescribed fire is often the least expensive management option in many cases, but there must be a management goal for the burn. “Paint it black” is not a goal.

Also keep in mind statutory requirements. Most firefighters are aware of the open burning ban in Nebraska Statute 81-520. That statute also contains additional requirements if certain criteria are met. For example, if the burn can be described as “...the controlled application of fire to existing vegetative matter on land utilized for grazing,” it fits the statutory requirement of a “range management burn” and requires a burn plan to be developed. The plan must contain several items, including management objectives, a map of the area, equipment on hand, material to be burned, nearby roads and homes, and a description of the weather conditions required for the burn. It’s an extensive list, but it includes the factors every prescribed burner should consider.

Finally, consider the recent passage of LB 1096. LB 1096 clarified the use of publicly funded fire equipment and requires that “...any funds, fees, or charges solicited, collected, or received by a volunteer department ... in consequence of the performance of fire or rescue services ... accomplished through the use by the volunteer department of equipment owned by the taxing authority ... and provided for that purpose, and paid by or on behalf of the recipient of those services... Such funds are public funds of the taxing authority supporting the volunteer department.” Boiled down, if fire department equipment is used in prescribed fire, any “fees” charged of the landowner are considered public funds.

Prescribed burning is an increasingly popular management tool in Nebraska, but as a state our experience with it is still growing. As fire service professionals, we must ensure that our involvement in prescribed burning is done safely and does not become a threat to those we volunteered to protect.



Tips From Tex

For the last several years, some of the Mutual Aid Associations have wanted to update their Mutual Aid Directory. I know it takes some time for the fire chief or their designated representative to complete the information packet and get it turned



in. Sometimes we all could use a friendly reminder (post-it notes seem to disappear), so here is it. These are the mutual aid associations that have asked to update their directories: Seward Co, Scottsbluff, York, Big 8, Hamilton Co., Pine Ridge, Mid-Nebraska, South Central, Saline Co., Nemaha, G.I. Area, Northeast, Loop Valley, Dodge Co., Loop Platte #2, Phelps Co., Boyd-Holt, Southeast and Elkhorn Valley. Also, several fire districts have asked for a Community Plan. They are: Firth, Amherst, Wymore, Ponca, Ceresco, Wolbach, Nemaha, Ansley, Broken Bow, Dakota City and Marquette. If you have any questions, or if I can help in any way, please give me a call.

Also, something new popped up on my radar screen that needs to be shared with you. The Federal Highway Administration under the Department of Transportation has established a new federal law that goes into effect November 24, 2008. This law pertains to the wearing of high – visibility vest by all personnel working on the roadways: fire, rescue, law enforcement, tow truck operators, construction crews, etc. For more information, give me a call or send me an e-mail, and I’ll be happy to share this information with you. Or, you can get information by going to www.respondersafety.com and look at the rules/law section. I know some of you are thinking “we won’t have to worry about it.

It’s not going to be enforced”. You’re right, they haven’t figured out how to enforce this law. But my concern is that since it’s a federal law, what will happen should a first responder be killed along the roadway and they were not wearing the required vest? The Department of Justice already requires a lot in order to justify the PSOB to surviving family members, and this could possibly be another factor in determining whether the PSOB is awarded or not. Think about it.

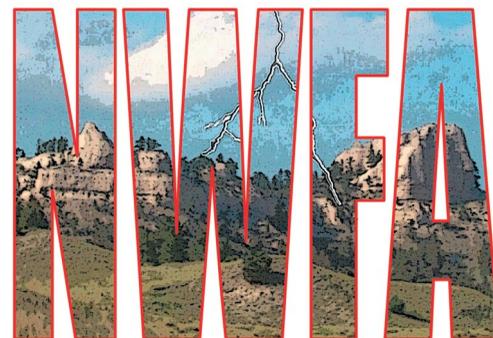
Until next time, stay safe.

George J. Teixeira II, fire resource mgr.



Nebraska Wildland Fire Academy

The First Annual Nebraska Wildland Fire Academy took place in Crawford, NE March 8 – 16, 2008. The academy included four National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG) courses: S130/S190/L180 Basic Wildland Firefighter, S131 Advanced Firefighter, S231 Engine Boss and S290 Intermediate Wildland Fire Behavior. Courses took place in the evening and on weekends to accommodate the work schedules of local volunteer firefighters. Five Annual Fireline Safety Refreshers were also offered throughout the Pine Ridge during the week.



NEBRASKA WILDLAND FIRE ACADEMY

Over the nine-day period, 108 hours of training were offered, the equivalent of nine 12-hour days. A total of 176 firefighters from 14 rural fire departments, three state agencies and one federal agency attended the academy. The academy attracted firefighters from South Dakota and Wyoming as well. One firefighter came from as far away as Lincoln.

The Academy enjoyed the support of the Panhandle community. Numerous local businesses and entities provided

contributions of time, funds and facilities. Those entities included the City of Crawford, Crawford Fire Department, Crawford Public Schools, Old West Trail Rodeo Association, Harrison Public Schools, Rushville Public Schools, Gering Fire Department and the Nebraska Game & Parks Commission. Private contributors included GMC of Chadron, Security First Bank, Bauerkempers, Inc., Hemingford Cooperative Telephone Co., Mobius Communications, WESTCO, Mercantile Chadron, Sturdevant's Auto Parts, National Wild Turkey Federation, Barb Prosser, Chirsten Osmotherly, Dakota Fire Supply, The Supply Cache and Drews Boots. Both local motels in Crawford also offered a discounted rate to firefighters.

The academy wouldn't have been a success without interagency support. Agencies involved with the academy included the Nebraska Forest Service, United States Forest Service, Nebraska State Fire Marshal's Office Training Division, University of Nebraska, the university's Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources and the National Weather Service.

Planning for the Second Annual Nebraska Wildland Fire Academy is set to begin in the very near future. To everyone who attended or contributed in one way or another, thanks and we look forward to seeing you again next year!



Wildfire Awareness Month

This year Nebraska is again joining the west-wide effort aimed at creating a greater awareness of wildfires. Many of the 17 states west of the Mississippi are also participating.

**JUNE IS
WILDFIRE
AWARENESS
MONTH!**

We hope you will join us to make folks in your districts and communities aware of the danger posed by wildfire and the steps to take for preventing them. Most at-risk are the rural residents of our state: farmers, ranchers or acerage owners.

The effort is being promoted by the Nebraska Forest Service, Nebraska Partners in Prevention and the Nebraska State Fire Marshal's Office. We hope you will join us in this effort.

Wildfire Awareness Month is a great time for open houses, storefront displays, articles in the local paper or a spot on your local radio station.



Panhandle Drought

Without a doubt, this will not come as good news for the folks in the Pine Ridge. State Climatologist Al Dutcher recently released predictions for the coming summer. Once again, the prediction is for drought conditions to persist in western Nebraska, especially in the Panhandle.

The most recent drought monitor conditions (www.drought.unl.edu/DM) show most of western Nebraska remains under drought conditions. The bullseye (no pun intended) is centered on the Dawes/Sioux County line, and the expectation is for conditions to stay the same or worsen.

The moral of the story is to be prepared. Preparedness efforts now will pay big dividends this summer. Make sure your grass rigs are ready—both mechanically and with the right equipment. Get the chain saw out and make sure it has fresh fuel, a sharp chain and a functional chain brake. And don't forget the saw chaps. Pull out the Yellow Book and get familiar with the procedures to call for aerial resources. And while you're at it, get together with your mutual aid departments so you know the person that shows up to help. Most importantly: fitness, fitness, fitness!! When the lightning starts popping, the time to get in shape is already gone.



Safe... Or Just Lucky?

Dad decides that the boy, now 17 years old, has been driving the Pacer long enough to feel safe in allowing him to take his '57 Chevy out. With the prerequisite curbside safety talk, Dad reluctantly turns over the keys. The boy promises he and his friends will be safe, and the car will come back in good shape. They take it easy until they're out of earshot, after which they spend the next several hours putting

the car through its paces: "cruising" to the neighboring town at 90 miles per hour, sliding corners, removing adequate tread from Dad's wheels, the same things many of us probably did at that age (or was that just me?). In the morning, the keys are returned with the comment "Back all safe and sound."

If you're doing a little reminiscing right now, come back to the present and read the last paragraph again. And consider this: Even though the boys and the car came home in one piece, were the evening's activities



Learn from the mistakes of others...you'll not have time to make them all yourself

"safe" or were they just lucky? Here's the thinking part. As a firefighter, think of the number of times

you've had close calls. Felling a tree and it drops the wrong way. Melting a tail light on the grass rig. Finding your helmet shield has taken on a new shape. Is this ringing any bells? The potential for danger may not even be noticed until well after the incident has passed. What would have to change in a very minor way to make that incident an injury or worse?

The little things are so important but are so often overlooked. Why put a helmet on when you're standing in a field of grass? Why look for escape routes and safety zones on every fire, even the small ones? Why even wear protective clothing? Because it sets into our frame of mind that this is the way it's done every time you step off the truck. When the big one comes, the little things will be so ingrained in the way you do business, it will be second nature.

Luck reinforces bad habits. Every time we "get away with" something, we grow another layer of bullet-proof skin. The next time you consider doing something risky, ask yourself one question – "Do I need to do this?" If you can't answer yes, then it's time to find a different tactic.



Nugget of the Day

courtesy of www.firenuggets.com

If you think training is expensive, check out the cost of ignorance. — Lieutenant David Record, Oklahoma City Fire Dept.

Sandy's Corner

Sally Fields once replied after receiving the Oscar, "You like me; you really do like me," and now it is my turn. "You DO read my articles; you really DO read my articles." As we try to get updates to you and "helpful hints" on reporting, it is good to know you do take the time to read these. Thank you!

Just a reminder to those filling out the yellow cards—you do not have to report a fire if it was not a wildfire and some acres were burned. If you have nothing to report in the "Acres Burned" column, there is no need to write it down. Some departments record every fire, regardless of it being a wildfire, and this is not necessary. We value all the fire calls you make, but for our reporting, wildfires are the only ones we need for our records.

We all live in a busy world, and most of you are not home during the day, and that is when I'm working. Many times when I'm trying to mail a statement and/or contracts, there is concern as to my having the correct address. Having a cell phone number for at least one of the department officers is nice if I need to call during the day. In the future when you are reporting a change in officers, please list cell phones if they are available. These lists are confidential, so you don't have to worry about a telemarketer getting your number.

When you send me an email, please

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create a subject line so I will know it is not SPAM. Until your email address has been put in my address book, your messages go to SPAM and I have to search through hundreds of them, looking for yours.

Agreement contracts are renewed every five years. These renewals have now been sent to the Rural Fire District president for their signature. If the department has vehicles or any equipment from the Nebraska Forest Service, they are also receiving a Memorandum of Understanding for a signature. Please check your vehicles to make sure your records and our records are the same.

The number of departments reporting on-line continues to grow with each week, and I encourage those departments who haven't tried this yet to give it a try. Our postage has been cut considerably since the inception of the new on-line reporting.

Please note that our address has changed, but we have not moved. Plant Industry Building, where we are currently located,

has been renamed "Entomology Hall." Since we will be moving to a new building "Forestry Hall" within the next few years, we have opted to keep our letterhead and envelopes until they have all been used. Also, if you come to our building, you will notice Nebraska Forest Service is not on the sign, but we are still here and will be until further notice. However, when you see 103 PI and also 103 ENTO on some communications from us, don't be alarmed, regardless of the address used, it will still reach us.

Fire School is only a short time away, and I will be there again "armed" with my computer and pen to update files, give a little "nudge" to those not reporting and to answer questions regarding on-line reporting. Look forward to seeing you there.

Sandy Lineberry
staff assistant



Calendar of Events

- May 16-18 Nebraska State Fire School, Fonner Park, Grand Island
- June 2008 **Nebraska Wildfire Awareness Month**
- May 31-June 6 Colorado Wildfire Academy, Gunnison, CO
- June 3-8 Midwest Wildfire Training Academy, Jefferson City, MO



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