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## **(Neb.)-Over 20 Volunteer Fire Departments Fight Wellnitz Fire**

By: Roxie Graham-Marski Posted at: 08/31/2012 05:54 PM

(Neb.)-Wellnitz Fire Public Information Officer James Krotz says approximately 46,000 acres in the Pine Ridge area of northern Sheridan County is now involved.

Crews from over 20 area volunteer fire departments are battling the blaze that has now scorched more than 60 sections in an area north of Highway 20 and between Beaver Wall Road and Highway 87. Fifty households in the sparsely inhabited area were notified to evacuate, 20 of those were mandatory evacuation orders.

There have been no fatalities and no serious injuries attributed to the fire. No homes have been lost though numerous out building have burned.

Lt. Governor Rick Sheehy, Adjutant General of the Nebraska National Guard Judd Lyons and Al Berndt, Assistant Director of the Nebraska Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) met with local authorities at the Rushville Fire Department Friday afternoon to review the situation and to arrange for the deployment of additional resources. State Senator Deb Fisher was also present.

Lyons announced that 34 National Guardsmen would be deployed to the site on Saturday morning. An LUH-77 Lakota helicopter is already on site making water drops from a 180 gallon bucket.

Fire Chief Jerry Kearns and Incident Commander Chris Heiser told the visiting officials that one of the most vexing problems was coordinating communications among the numerous departments on site. Berndt immediately arranged for the deployment of two NEMA staff in an incident command vehicle that will include a special communication suite that should help alleviate these problems. Berndt also arranged for a fuel contract that will permit fuel costs for the incident to be billed directly to NEMA.

Kearns announced the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) had offered assistance with the fire, which at one point is within four miles of the Pine Ridge Reservation/South Dakota border. Among the BIA resources that may soon be available are two fixed wing aircraft equipped for slurry drops.

Heavy equipment from the Sheridan County Road Department, the Nebraska Department of Roads, Kimball, and McCook are helping cut fire lines in the rugged, pine timbered area west of Beaver Wall. High winds, scorching temperatures and extremely dry conditions resulting from the prolonged drought are making this an extremely dangerous fire.

Region 23 Emergency Services Coordinator Nan Gould approached the Sheridan County Board of Commissioners in July about issuing a disaster declaration because of extreme drought conditions. The declaration, which was approved by the Board on July 30th, will extend to cover this wildfire and will help facilitate the reimbursement of the cost of fighting the fire.

--Courtesy James Krotz