

Early Wildfire Season In High Gear

BY DIRK LAMMERS
Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS — Although warmer weather is being embraced by many snow-accustomed residents in the Plains and Upper Midwest, the unseasonably dry conditions have turned the region's vast grasslands into a tinderbox. Wildfires have already scorched thousands of acres, destroyed rural homes and caused two deaths.

The region's early start to wildfire season was brought on by a "vicious cycle" of weather patterns, explained Beth Hermanson of the South Dakota Wildland Fire Suppression Division. Three years of excessive snow and rain fed grass growth before this winter's relatively light snowpack, which left grass standing 4 or 5-feet tall in some areas dried out — creating perfect fuel for wildfires.

"There's a lot of fuel to burn out there, which is a recipe for disaster as far as fires go," said North Dakota Forest Service fire specialist Ryan Melin.

Plus, the nice weather is luring people outside. Experts say the majority of grassfires are sparked by humans.

Fire warnings were issued Wednesday in North Dakota and Wisconsin because of strong winds and dry conditions, while a burn ban in Minnesota is taking effect Monday. Several states spanning from Colorado to Missouri were under similar warnings earlier this month.

In the last week, a wind-fueled grassfire in eastern Colorado injured three firefighters and destroyed at least two homes as it charred across about 37 square miles. A North Dakota farmer lost his home to a similar fire, and two deaths were attributed to grassfires in Wisconsin.

Such fires — fueled by wind, feeding on dry grass — are hard to manage. And the blazes become even more treacherous as they spread across hills, valleys or creek beds because they can quickly split and move in different directions, Hermanson said.

Melin said North Dakota averages about 500 grassfires a year, but he expects far more this season

considering dozens have already been reported. He also noted that two consecutive springs of heavy rain and flooding dampened grassfires but also spurred excessive vegetation growth.

"This year, my gut feeling is we're going to be quite a bit above that," Melin said, adding that about 90 percent of such fires are sparked by humans. "We've had a ton of fires and multiple large-scale events of over 1,000 acres."

In Missouri, several fires burned across about 8,500 acres during six days in early March, including three that were each responsible for charring more than 1,000 acres, said Ben Webster, fire program supervisor for the Missouri Department of Conservation.

Several weather factors combined to add to the fire threat this month: temperatures in the 70s, clear skies, low humidity, and wind gusting 40 to 50 mph. The warm weather also lured many people to work in their yards, he said.

"Fires get away from folks," Webster said. "A lot of it was careless use of fire, burning trash, burning yard debris."

In northwestern Wisconsin, fire officials are worried about hundreds of thousands of trees that were topped during a windstorm last summer that left about 2 million cords of wood on the ground — equivalent to a year's worth of logging.

The Department of Natural Resources, the National Guard and loggers have been racing to get as wood off the ground, but they've cleared only about half of the timber, said Steve Runstrom, the DNR's St. Croix Area forestry leader.

The tangles of logs and brush have made it nearly impossible to walk through the woods or bring in heavy equipment, he said. If a fire starts, firefighters would be forced to fall back to defensible positions such as roads or lakes, raising the threat for the thousands of homes, farms and cottages across the region.

Although rain is expected through the weekend, Runstrom warned that it takes only a few hours of sun to dry the ground, leaves and trees to the point where they'll burn.

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While most members of the board agreed on the proposal, Gertsema stressed that it was a temporary fix.

"You can see this is just a one-year plan, because when you get into 2013-14, you can see we're right back into a problem," he said. "Really what this is doing is moving the cliff back a year, and you're going to need to use that insurance fund to make this go."

When asked why the board would consider a temporary solution, board president Kathy Greenway said it was still hopeful that other forms of revenue would become available, such as an increase in funding from the state.

"We're uncertain of what's going to happen with the sales tax revenue that's out there, and just looking at the options that still might be coming down, with that unknown factor out there, we really don't know."

Board member Jay Williams expressed his concern over making so many reinstatements utilizing revenue from a reserve fund.

"I'm concerned here that all we're talking about is bringing things back," he said. "We're doing some attrition cuts — I think that's just fine — but I think we really need to start thinking about cuts here, because at some point, if we don't, we're going to be out of money ... I think we as a board are not being responsible when we say we're going to use

up our reserves. Then, somehow, magically, the money is going to come. I think we're really making a mistake here not cutting out those activities that we already cut."

Greenway said she appreciated Williams' thoughts, but stated that the board must also consider funds that would be lost if students went elsewhere because of a lack of activities. For every student that would leave for another school due to a cut in activities, the district would lose \$4,500.

Mike Lemon, who spoke to the board on behalf of the "We the People" group, said he appreciated what the board has done to accommodate the current circumstances in which the community finds itself.

"I think from the standpoint of the 'We the People' organization,

we like the fact that you have changed your outlook on the sacredness of the health insurance reserve fund — that it can be something that can get you over the hurdles here," he said.

Lemon also encouraged the board to proceed with its ideas to look into changes into its health care plan for possible savings in the future.

Following the discussion, the board directed the administration to move forward with the recommended budget, as well as to put in place teacher contracts based on the activities and positions included in the proposal. The board also set a special meeting for 5:30 p.m. April 2 to discuss these actions and to finalize any available contracts.

At the conclusion of the meeting, the board convened into executive session, but no action was taken.

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new approach this year by making the activity cover a longer period, said Paul Lepisto of Pierre, regional conservation coordinator for the Izaak Walton League of America (IWLA).

The effort seeks to educate boaters about the importance of keeping their boats clean to prevent the spread of invasive species, Lepisto said. The species include not only the zebra mussel and Asian carp but also plant life like the purple loosestrife, he said.

"Rather than focusing on one weekend, we are spreading this out for five weekends," he said. "We will catch more boaters, and we won't run the risk of having bad weather during just one weekend."

Lepisto expects greater success with the new approach.

"We expect a huge response during that first week, during South Dakota's weekend for free admission to state parks," he said. "We're not doing Memorial Day weekend. We know it's a high traffic, three-day weekend, but we're not asking our volunteers to give up their holiday."

The Clean Boat Event will cover ramps on both the South Dakota and Nebraska side of the river, Lepisto said. Another change will allow volunteers to move freely and quickly at and between ramps rather than stay stationed for hours at a time.

"We are taking a run-and-gun approach. It's up to the teams, and they can coordinate their efforts," he said. "Besides talking to boaters, we are distributing literature. If you have made a sweep and covered the ramps during a weekend, you can be done in two hours."

The third event, the Missouri River Watershed School Festival, continues to roll along, according to organizer Mary Robb with the City of Yankton.

"We had one school that had to withdraw for this year, but we expect them to return next year," she said. "But in the meantime, we picked up Lynch (Neb.), Wynot and Newcastle (Neb.), and St. Mary's of O'Neill, Neb., so we are back up to 356 students again."

Of those who previously registered, Yankton Middle School has 210 students and 15 adults; Crofton has 21 students and one adult; Sacred Heart School of Yankton has 48 students and two adults; and Andes Central has 26 students and two adults.

"Most all of the schools who came in past years are back," Robb said. "It's great that we have picked up new schools. As they attend, they are broadening the scope of

this festival."

The school festival features 12 sessions, each 15 minutes long, with students rotating among a number of sessions during the morning. Students can ask questions or make comments.

Because of the record number of students attending the education festival, organizers are looking for former teachers to assist with the event, Robb said.

All students will attend two of the sessions: "Fish of the Missouri River" by Josh Wilhelm of the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, and "2011 Flood Impact" by a member of the Missouri River Institute in Vermillion.

The following is a list of the other presenters:

- Playing in the Water (water safety) — Karla Zeutenhorst, Corps of Engineers, and Sam Schellhaas, South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks;
- Cottonwoods — Lisa Yager, National Park Service;
- Stream Table — Melissa Floren;
- Wetland Ecology — Kirsten Wert and Danielle Quist;
- River's Significance — Lana Gravatt - Yankton Sioux Tribe;
- Rain Simulator — Jeff Hemenway, Natural Resources and Conservation Service;
- Terns and Plovers — Gene Bormann and Greg Pavelka, Corps of Engineers;
- Pallid Sturgeon — Dane Pauley, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission;
- Invasive Species — Mike Smith, South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks;
- Historical Look — Dave Rambo, National Park Service.

The festival looks to surpass 400 students next year, prompting organizers to split the event and assign the schools to a morning or afternoon session, Lepisto said.

"It's a nice situation to have (with the record numbers). If we split the event for 2013, it will increase the educational experience," he said. "We will have smaller group sizes and more one-on-one personal interaction rather than what you see with 35 to 40 kids in a group."

The students learn from hands-on experiences, and many teachers incorporate the festival's activities into their classroom lessons, Robb said.

"The focus isn't just on one area. It covers scientific, historical and agricultural," she said. "It's extremely important for the future that the kids learn these things. They see how human activity affects the river. We make a difference with our presence."

And the ongoing effects of the flooding provide the students with a close-up look at history in the making, Robb said.

"We would like the kids to be aware that this (flooding and its impact) may never happen again in their lifetimes," she said.

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