

Forecaster Expects Busy SD Wildfire Season

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — State Fire Meteorologist Darren Clabo says there is a potential for large wildfires in western South Dakota this spring.

Clabo says he is expecting an “above-average” fire season in the region, even if there is a lot of precipitation. The area has been mired in drought since last year.

The *Rapid City Journal* reports that Clabo says the southern Black Hills and southwestern South Dakota are the biggest areas of concern. But he says he’s also worried about other parts of the west, and also the Missouri River Valley.

Missing Min.-Security Inmate Back In Custody

SIOUX FALLS (AP) — A state prison inmate is back in custody after walking away from the minimum-security unit at the South Dakota State Penitentiary in Sioux Falls.

Corrections officials say 24-year-old Mark Fromelt left the facility Thursday to go to a work-release job but didn’t show up at the job site. They say he later returned to the prison on his own.

Fromelt is serving a six-year sentence for a grand theft conviction in Minnehaha County.

Nebraska Inmate Sentenced For Stabbing

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — A Nebraska inmate has been given 100 to 140 more years in prison for slicing and stabbing a prison case-worker.

The *Lincoln Journal Star* reports that 42-year-old Patrick Howley said during his sentencing on Thursday that the caseworker started their disagreement, “and I finished it.”

The caseworker, Jeffrey Laabs, was in the courtroom. He was surrounded by relatives and former co-workers. Laabs still works for the prison but not as a caseworker.

The attack occurred on April 10, 2011, at the Lincoln Correctional Center. Howley was serving 16- to 22-year sentence on convictions for robbery and driving offenses.

Man Pays \$102,000 For S.D. Bighorn Tag

RAPID CITY (AP) — A Watertown hunter has paid \$102,000 at auction for one of three highly sought Black Hills bighorn sheep tags.

The state Game, Fish and Parks Department is honoring the man’s request that his name not be publicly released. It will become a matter of public record when the tag is issued.

The *Rapid City Journal* reports that the auction last weekend was held through the Midwest Chapter of the Wild Sheep Foundation. It was the first time South Dakota has auctioned a bighorn ram tag. Proceeds will go toward wild sheep research and management in the Black Hills.

Two other tags are being made available through the general application process.

3 Neb. Panhandle Tornado Sirens Fail Tests

SCOTTSBLUFF, Neb. (AP) — Three tornado sirens in the Nebraska Panhandle have failed their tests.

A siren in Harrisburg, one in Morrill and one in Terrytown didn’t go off during Wednesday’s checks.

Jerry Bretthauer, of the Region 22 Emergency Management Agency, says signal issues could have caused the problems. He says workers are checking for the exact reasons so repairs can be made or signal issues resolved.

Bretthauer says the Harrisburg siren is tested every month and usually passes. He says that until Wednesday no problems had been reported with the Morrill and Terrytown sirens.

Police Called To School Find Catnip, Not Pot

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — Police were alerted after officials at an Omaha elementary found what appeared to be marijuana in a third-grader’s backpack, but officers determined the substance was catnip.

Omaha Public Schools spokesman David Patton says administrators at Miller Park Elementary called police Friday to report the substance found in a bag.

Officer Michael Pecha says when police arrived, they determined it was catnip, not marijuana.

The school principal says the student told authorities he found the bag on his way to school.

Easter Service  
At Mt. Rushmore  
Set To Go On

KEYSTONE (AP) — Officials at Mount Rushmore National Memorial say they’ve found a way to enable an annual Easter sunrise service to be held as planned.

The *Rapid City Journal* reports Superintendent Cheryl Schreier told service organizers earlier this week that automatic federal spending cuts that took effect this month would mean the memorial’s visitor center and the elevators and bathrooms inside wouldn’t be open for the 7 a.m. service that draws up to 2,000 people.

Memorial officials say they’ve come up with a way to allow limited access to the bathrooms and elevators that go to the memorial’s lower-level amphitheater without opening the entire visitor center.

Two employees normally would be required to staff the center during the service, and they would be due overtime pay, which the memorial has eliminated.

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South Dakota

PUC Suspends Elevator’s License

**BY CHET BROKAW**  
Associated Press

PIERRE — The South Dakota Public Utilities Commission on Friday suspended the licenses of a financially troubled grain elevator in Gregory, but a commission official said it appears the elevator will be able to pay all farmers who sold grain to it.

Jim Mehlhaff, director of the commission’s Grain Warehouse Division, said the Gregory Farmers Elevator has a net worth and assets that should be sufficient to cover what it owes farmers for grain. However, the elevator’s financial condition has deteriorated to the point it no longer can operate, he said.

“Obviously what we have today is an elevator that’s trying to get their affairs in order basically as they approach the end of the line,” Mehlhaff told the commission.

The three-member commission voted unanimously to immediately suspend the elevator’s grain buyer and grain warehouse licenses. The licenses will be revoked permanently in 15 days unless the elevator requests a hearing and presents evidence it can continue in operation.

Commissioner Chris Nelson said the license

suspensions were necessary to prevent any losses to farmers and give the elevator time to possibly regroup.

Sherman Vomacka, chairman of the elevator’s board, took part in the commission hearing by telephone and did not contest the suspension. But he said there’s still a chance another cooperative will buy the elevator.

“There is some hope there,” Vomacka said.

Mehlhaff said he believes the elevator got into financial trouble because of bad decisions by two former managers. One of those former managers has been charged in court with embezzling more than \$17,000 from the elevator, but that is not considered the reason the elevator is in financial trouble.

Mehlhaff said the PUC staff began monitoring the elevator closely in August after a report it had delayed payment to a farmer. The elevator’s financial condition improved for a brief time but then began to worsen, he said.

By the end of February, the elevator had lost \$89,000 since its fiscal year began last June, Mehlhaff said. Its working capital, or easily accessible cash, also has dropped, he said.

Farmers had sought to raise additional working capital to keep the elevator afloat, but they

fell short of raising the \$400,000 needed, Mehlhaff said.

“The other day it just became apparent they were not going to be able to raise that additional capital and therefore would not be able to continue as a going concern,” Mehlhaff said.

Officials at Friday’s hearing said checks issued to several farmers totaling more than \$300,000 have not cleared. Vomacka said he holds a \$144,000 check.

Mehlhaff said the elevator should be able to make those checks good.

He said the elevator has an \$800,000 warehouse bond and a \$100,000 grain buyers bond.

“My assessment would be that all the producers should be taken care of, and the bond likely would not even come into play,” Mehlhaff said.

Commissioner Gary Hanson asked if the Gregory elevator’s problems are an indication that other elevators across the state also might face problems.

“I would say this is not what I would call indicative of the industry in general,” Mehlhaff said. “I do not see a weakening of the grain-handling industry in general.”

USDA, DuPont Agree To Corn Stover Guidelines

JOHNSTON, Iowa (AP) — U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack signed an agreement Friday with DuPont that will help establish guidelines for how the company will collect corn-plant residue for a new ethanol plant in central Iowa while maintaining soil quality.

DuPont is building a \$200 million plant in the town of Nevada that will use 375,000 tons of corn leaves and stalks, known as stover, annually to make cellulosic ethanol. It will be the nation’s largest cellulosic plant when production — scheduled for 2014 — begins, making 30 million gallons of ethanol a year.

Until recently, ethanol was made from the corn kernel. But the demand for corn and the recent drought has pushed the grain’s prices higher. Companies like DuPont have poured millions of dollars into research to figure out how to break down plant matter so it can be refined into ethanol.

Commercial-sized cellulosic plants are relatively new, but already about 70 projects are under construction in the United States. Two plants, including the DuPont one, are being built in the nation’s leading corn-producing state, and will use the leaves, stalks and cobs of the corn plant.

“Cellulosic advanced biofuel is here and it’s here to stay,” Vilsack said. “This is an industry that is making America more energy secure. It’s creating jobs. It’s helping to reduce the cost of gas to consumers and it’s reducing our reliance of foreign oil.”

With the expansion of cellulosic

ethanol, demand for corn stover and other biomass to feed the plants is expected to increase.

Farmers will benefit from the growing industry because companies are willing to pay them for the stover — which usually sits in the fields and decomposes after the harvest. Payments are typically about \$15 a ton; two tons of stover per acre is usually removed, equating to about \$30 an acre.

However, a certain amount of stover must be left on the ground to help replenish nutrients and control erosion.

Jeff Taylor, a fifth-generation farmer on about 1,600 acres north of Ames, said he’s worked with DuPont for more than three years

studying the impact of removing stover from the field. The company takes about 40 percent and tests have shown it’s beneficial to the soil, Taylor said.


Advances in corn genetics means farmers can pack more corn plants into an acre — from 25,000 seeds per acre a decade ago to 34,000 an acre today, Taylor said. He gets a better yield and bigger paycheck at harvest, but there’s also significantly more stover left behind.

“For producers, we started adding more tillage to control that amount of stover. As you remove 30 to 40 percent of that, it saves me a tillage pass, it saves me time as a producer,” he said.


Taylor said he’s found through soil testing that too much stover can cause certain bacteria to thrive, hinder the effectiveness of nitrogen fertilizer and suppress the emergence of new seeds in the following growing season.

Friday’s agreement directs the USDA’s Natural Resource Conservation Service to work with DuPont and Iowa farmers for five years in order to set standards for stover collection that preserves the soil and feeds the cellulosic ethanol industry.

Vilsack, who traveled to Des Moines for the signing, said agriculture’s success begins and ends with soil conditions.



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