

### Neb. Wandering Moose May Be Heading Home

SCOTTSSBLUFF, Neb. (AP) — A moose spotted in Scotts Bluffs County this summer may be on his way home. The moose was first seen south of Gering, but over the past few weeks has wandered north of Minatare and Bayard before coming back to Scotts Bluff County. KNEB radio says the moose was seen on Wednesday in a corn field in west Scottsbluff. Game and Parks conservation officer Scott Brandt has been monitoring the animal's travels. He says he hopes the moose is moving into the high country and heading back to Wyoming or Colorado. Brandt says young moose have typically been kicked out of their original habitat by their mother, and are now searching for an area they can call home. Brandt says some of them go the wrong way.

### Judge Dismisses Ex-NU Regent's Libel Lawsuit

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — A judge has dismissed a libel lawsuit by a former University of Nebraska regent against the student newspaper at the university's flagship campus in Lincoln. Robert Prokop argued a 2006 editorial the *Daily Nebraskan* ran hurt him and undermined his campaign for regent. The students who ran the newspaper that year say they believed the editorial they wrote that said Prokop had plagiarized material he submitted to the paper in the early 1970s was accurate. The trial began Tuesday. The *Lincoln Journal Star* says before the jury had a chance to consider Prokop's case Wednesday, Lancaster County District Judge Jodi Nelson dismissed the lawsuit. She said Prokop failed to prove the newspaper's editorial was inaccurate or that it published it despite having doubts about its accuracy.

### Lawmakers To Hold Meeting With TransCanada

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — A group of Nebraska lawmakers will meet next week with a Canadian pipeline operator official to discuss concerns about the proposed route of the Keystone XL pipeline through the state over the Ogallala aquifer. Speaker of the Legislature Mike Flood announced the meeting at a news conference Wednesday, hours after three environmental groups sued TransCanada to halt preliminary work on the proposed 1,700-mile-long oil pipeline. Flood says he and state Sens. Chris Langemeier, Annette Dubas and Kate Sullivan will meet with the TransCanada official next Tuesday.

## Neb. Officials Predict \$4 Million In Fire Damage

BY GRANT SCHULTE  
Associated Press Writer

STAPLETON, Neb. (AP) — Weary Nebraska firefighters battled wind-swept grass fires Wednesday that devoured more than 20,000 acres of farmland and caused millions of dollars in estimated crop and property damage. At least one home was destroyed near the central Nebraska town of Stapleton, a farm-and-ranch community about 30 miles north of North Platte. Authorities said one landowner was hospitalized in North Platte for smoke inhalation and flown to a hospital in Lincoln for further treatment.

Fire Chief Frank Kramer said more than 50 departments helped fight the blaze, with some traveling from more than two hours away. He said area departments have contained much of the blaze, but firefighters remain concerned it may flare again because of dry conditions and gusting winds.

Kramer said it's too early to know an exact dollar figure, but the fire hit as local farmers were harvesting and storing crops for winter.

"That's what we're focusing on now — protecting structures and trying to hold the fire line," Kramer said. "This is going to be a million-plus dollar deal."

Gov. Dave Heineman declared a state of emergency for Stapleton and surrounding Logan County to help local responders. State emergency officials said early damage estimates had reached \$4 million.

At least 12 pivot irrigation systems were damaged in the fire, and four homes sustained varying levels of damage, said Al

Berndt, assistant director of the Nebraska Emergency Management Agency. Berndt said air operations dropped 14 loads of water on the fire — about 3,000 gallons total — before high winds forced them to stop.

Kramer said the fire has scorched between 20,000 and 23,000 acres. Local pilots dumped water on the blaze from crop-duster planes, but had to stop by Wednesday afternoon because of the wind.

"I think we're gaining on it," Kramer said. "It's just going to take a little more time and energy."

Gusty winds greater than 30 mph whipped over the scorched earth on Wednesday, filling the air with ash and dirt. Ranchers scrambled to round up loose cattle that had fled from the fire, while farmers surveyed the damage. Blearly-eyed firefighters monitored the fires from gravel back roads south of town, their clothes and trucks coated with ash.

Kramer said the fire started shortly after 3 p.m. Tuesday and was caused by exhaust heat from a combine that was harvesting beans. He said officials hoped to have the blaze extinguished by Wednesday evening, but wind and heat were complicating their efforts.

Art Kramer, who farms south of Stapleton, said the fire burned one-half to three-fourths of his family's corn crop. His wife, Becky Kramer, said the family will likely have to sell all their cattle because the fire ruined valuable pasture land and destroyed their winter feed supply. They also lost an unknown amount of hay, at least two old tractors and other farm equipment.

Art and Becky Kramer raced out of their

home Tuesday as the flames inched toward their front door. They hauled tractors, trailers, hay slats and fuel wagons to an intersection two miles away, hoping to preserve their livelihood even if they lost the house.

"There was no time to get anything out," Becky Kramer said. "We just had to save the equipment."

Becky Kramer said she was devastated by the fire, and the family hadn't yet decided what to do.

"The fire got so close to the house yesterday that we had to leave," she said. "When we came back, all the trees were lit up on fire like Christmas lights."

An unrelated fire in the southeast Nebraska town of Beatrice broke out Wednesday under similar circumstances. Authorities said a combine in a soybean field sparked the blaze Wednesday afternoon.

Officials told the *Beatrice Daily Sun* that the fire was caused by an overheated manifold on the combine.

At least four fire departments were called, and farmers used discs to plow up the edges along the fire in an effort to contain it.

KWBE radio said firefighters got the fire under control around 4 p.m., and were working to contain hot spots. There was no immediate estimate on how many acres were involved.

The response to the fires included local and volunteer fire departments, the State Fire Marshal's Office, the Nebraska State Patrol, the Logan County Sheriff, Red Cross, Salvation Army, state and local emergency management, and the state Department of Roads.

## S.D. Panel Urges Cut In Wind Farm Construction Taxes

BY CHET BROKAW  
Associated Press

PIERRE — A legislative task force recommended Wednesday that the state cut construction taxes for wind farms to help South Dakota compete with nearby states in attracting projects that generate electricity from wind.

However, the Wind Energy Task Force will leave it up to Gov. Dennis Daugaard and the full Legislature to decide exactly how to reduce the contractor's excise tax and sales tax that apply to construction costs of wind farms.

Based on information presented by developers, the task force also found that South Dakota's construction taxes are substantially higher than those charged by neighboring states.

Task force member John DiDonato, an official with developer NextEra Energy Resources, said construction taxes play an important role in determining the cost of a wind project, and South Dakota's contractor's excise tax puts it at a disadvantage to other

states that do not have the tax. "I think there are tax problems," DiDonato said.

Deputy Revenue Secretary David Wiest, also a task force member, cast the only vote against the recommendation to reduce construction taxes, saying he is not convinced South Dakota's taxes on wind farms are significantly higher than other states. South Dakota has other advantages, such as wind that keeps turbines turning a higher percentage of the time than in other states, he said.

"I don't think we're that far off kilter," Wiest said.

South Dakota charges a 4 percent sales tax on materials used in constructing wind farms and other projects. It also levies a 2 percent excise tax on a contractor's gross receipts for a project.

The task force report includes an analysis done by developers that found the South Dakota sales tax and contractor's excise tax on a 200-megawatt wind project, with an estimated price tag of about \$360 million, would be \$12.9 million under current law.

Construction taxes on the same project would be \$2 million in North Dakota, \$2.8 million in Minnesota and \$3.4 million in Iowa, according to the analysis.

The issue is complicated by uncertainty about South Dakota's existing tax refund programs for wind farms and other large construction projects.

The current law, set to end in December 2012, allows developers of large wind farms to get a 45 percent refund of construction taxes for projects costing \$10 million to \$40 million, and 55 percent of those taxes for projects costing more than \$40 million. Construction tax refunds have exceeded \$20 million a year to wind farms and other large projects in recent years.

A new law, passed this year, is supposed to replace the current refund system in January 2013 by allocating money each year to the state Board of Economic Development, which would have the discretion to decide which large construction projects get incentive grants. However, the fate of that law is uncertain because

opponents have referred it to a statewide public vote in the November 2012 general election.

Wiest said he is worried about passing any new tax refund or incentive when no one knows whether the incentive law passed this year will actually take effect in January 2013.

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