



# NEWS RELEASE

Rocky Mountain Incident Management Team A  
Nebraska Emergency Management and  
Sheridan County Public Information  
Joint Information Center (JIC)

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## **Wellnitz Fire Expands to Approximately 96,000 Acres – 63,000 in Nebraska and 33,000 in South Dakota**

Officials from the Oglala Sioux Tribe, the State of South Dakota, the Nebraska Emergency Management Agency, Sheridan County and an interagency Incident Management Team met Sunday morning to negotiate a Delegation of Authority agreement designed to facilitate cooperation and effective use of resources among the several jurisdictions.

The fire has now involved approximately 96,000 acres of the scenic Pine Ridge and Beaver Wall area in Nebraska and has crossed the South Dakota border onto the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. The South Dakota portion of the fire has burned as far north as Oglala covering some 27,000 acres.

Rocky Mountain Incident Management Team A Incident Commander Todd Richardson observed that the level of respect and cooperation among the gathered officials was very encouraging. He complimented the hard work and effort put forth by the volunteer firefighters prior to the teams arrival.

Assistant Fire Chief Jerry Kearns of Rushville had a bit of good news on Sunday morning.

“From midnight on, the fire just laid down” said Kearns. “The wind dropped, the humidity rose and the fuel load somewhat diminished. We got a real break.”

When asked for his assessment of Saturday night, Rushville Mayor Chris Heiser replied “encouraging.” We held the lines – there was no major advancement.”

Kearns spoke at some length about the agonizing decisions commanders have to make to deploy limited resources to save one valuable building or asset and know that another will have to be lost because of that decision. He said it is especially difficult to see a rancher’s hay go up in flames because there are not enough resources to save it.

Saturday saw the departure of units from 18 volunteer fire departments from other Nebraska communities. These volunteers were called home to fight fires near their own communities.

Sheriff Terry Robbins reported seeing no houses destroyed by the fire and expressed his admiration for the firefighters who were able to save all those homes in the face of truly terrible fire conditions. Sheriff department personnel called every household in the Wellnitz fire area to urge evacuation then visited every home in person said Deputy Everette Langford.

Richardson said a DC-10 Very Large Air Tanker (VLAT) is stationed at Rapid City, however he thought it was unlikely it would be deployed on the Wellnitz fire. The VLAT is an effective tool for fire suppression but the fire in Sheridan County has not escalated to the point where using the VLAT would be an efficient, effective and strategically safe use of resources.

### **Air Operations**

- Dropping water and foam as needed.

## Road Closures

- For up-to-date road closures call [www.511.nebraska.gov](http://www.511.nebraska.gov) or call 511
- All state highways are open in the northern panhandle. Watch for fire fighters, smoke and wild fire.
- Smoke can rapidly reduce visibility.
- There may be intermittent road closures because of the response.

## Safety Message

- Fire officials request that members of the public stay off county roads to keep them clear for firefighting efforts.

## Evacuations:

- No evacuation orders are in place at the current time.

## Weather Report

- Dry and hot weather conditions will continue. According to the National Weather Service, the combination of strong winds, low relative humidity and dry fuels will lead to critical fire weather conditions across the northern Rockies and Plains on Sunday afternoon and evening. This may lead to rapid growth of uncontrolled existing or new fires. Red Flag Warnings have been posted for these areas.

## Fire stats at a glance:

**Start Date:** Aug. 29, approximately 5 p.m.

**Containment:** 27 percent

**Cause:** Lightning

**Acreage:** 96,000

63,000 in Nebraska, 33,000 in South Dakota

**Personnel:** 350

- **Cooperating Agencies:** Sheridan County, Region 23 Emergency Management, Sheridan Sheriff's Department, State of Nebraska, Nebraska Emergency Management Agency, Nebraska National Guard, State Fire Marshal's Wildland Incident Response Assistance Team, Nebraska State Patrol, Department of Roads and Department of Environmental Quality, Nebraska Forest Service, Farmer's COOP, Cities of Rushville, Gordon and Hays Springs, 72<sup>nd</sup> Civil Support Team, Cherry Country Roads, American Red Cross, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Pine Ridge Indian Reservation,

**Crews:** 3

**Engines:** 71 apparatus

**Injuries:** No new injuries

**Aviation :**

2 South Dakota National Guard Blackhawk helicopters

1 Bell 407

1 Astar helicopter

1 Nebraska National Guard 147

**Structures destroyed:** nothing new to report

**Volunteer Fire Departments:** 39 departments

Ainsworth, Ansley, Atkinson, Axtell, Bassett, Bayard, Burwell, Casper, Cody Rural Fire, Curtis, Dalton, Edison, Elm Creek, Gordon, Hay Springs, Heart of the Hills, Hyannis, Keya Paha Co. RF, Kilgore, Maxwell, Merriman, Minatare, Minden, Morrill, North Platte, O'Neill, Oxford, Paxton , Red Willow Western, Rushville, Sargent, Sidney, Stuart, Thedford, Valentine, Wallace, Willsonville and Woodlake



**List of County Emergency Managers**