

Several personnel from area departments have been summoned as mutual aid to fires in the rough terrain north of Ogallala the first two weekends of August.

By Jan Rahn

Managing Editor

Twice during the first part of August, Perkins County firefighters have provided mutual aid to the Keystone-Lemoyne/Ogallala departments to fight fires in Keith County.

Departments in the county were summoned to wildfires on Aug. 3 and again on Sunday, Aug. 12.

According to Grant Fire Chief Don Softley, the assistance provided on Sunday tied the all-time record set 13 years ago in 1999 for the most fire calls within a one-year time frame for GVFD personnel. And it's only August.

Lake Mac Fire

Several wildfires in Keith County on Aug. 3 were responsible for destruction of nearly 60,000 acres in the Lake McConaughy area.

The fires which burned approximately 94 square miles were started by lightning and quickly got out of control.

Firefighters from nearly 40 western Nebraska departments responded with mutual aid to the Keystone-Lemoyne Volunteer Fire Department.

Grant, Venango, Madrid and Elsie firefighters offered assistance, some having returned only a few days previously from fighting wildfires in the Niobrara River area east of Valentine that burned more than 75,000 acres.

Two Black Hawk helicopters and 13 National Guard personnel were deployed to assist.

No structures burned, but many cabins, condos, summer homes and town houses were threatened near the Bayside Golf Club on the southwest shoreline of the lake.

The separate fires and the largest areas burned include:

Otter Creek: Nearly 40,000 acres burned north of Otter Creek lodge on the north side of Lake McConaughy, with some areas not accessible to firefighters in the canyon terrain.

McKeage: After being contained, a new breakout burned nearly 3,000 acres two miles north of the Keith/Arthur county line on Highway 61 four miles west.

Ackley Valley: Nearly 6,000 acres a few miles north of Kingsley Dam burned in hilly terrain on property of Haythorn Ranch.

Glen Echo: Ground crews could not access canyons that burned nearly 7,500 acres in the northeastern part of Keith County and into McPherson County.

Eagle Canyon Hideaway: Inaccessible by firefighters, an estimated 2,500 to 3,000 acres burned from north of Brule to the south shoreline of Lake McConaughy.

Parker Ranch: Approximately 350 acres burned.

Area fire departments who responded to the mutual aid call included Arnold, Arthur, Big Springs, Brule, Brady, Calaway, Chappell, Elsie, Grant, Hershey, Imperial, Keystone-Lemoyne, Lewellen, Madrid, Maxwell, Merna, Mullen, North Platte, Ogallala, Oshkosh, Paxton, Sandhills, Stapleton, Sutherland, Thedford, Tryon, Venango, Wallace and Julesburg, Colo.

Aid was also summoned from Scotts Bluff County, Hayes Center, Wauneta, Red Willow,

Western, Broken Bow, Curtis, Gothenburg and Cozad.

Firefighters across the region continue to be on alert as drought continues and periodic red flag warnings are issued by the National Weather Service.

Aug. 12 Wildfires

Perkins County firefighters were summoned on Sunday when wildfires broke out along North Highway 61 between Ogallala and Kingsley Dam.

According to Grant Fire Chief Don Softley, a hot bearing on a boat trailer ignited prairie at mile marker 92 along the highway.

The call for help came in just after 1 p.m. on Sunday and nearly 20 personnel from Grant, Madrid and Elsie responded, along with Ole Sihm of Grant who expelled water and foam from his crop dusting plane.

“Ole did a fantastic job,” said Softley. “He was superb and was complimented highly for his precision flying.”

Hi-Line Co-op of Elsie provided a tanker at the Ogallala airport where the plane was filled.

Winds fueled the fires which burned toward the south as far as Highway 30. Most of the flames were extinguished—a few jumped the highway but were quickly doused, said Softley and the fires were completely stopped prior to reaching the river bottom.

Nearly 7,000 acres of pasture ground were destroyed in the afternoon blaze.