

An Ear to the Ground

By Walt Bones, South Dakota Secretary of Agriculture

Appreciating our Wildland Fire Units

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As I was growing up in southeastern South Dakota, prairie and forest fires were not a concern. Every once in a while, a trash fire might get away from us or maybe a bearing would go out on the baler and a red-hot ball bearing would start some grass on fire, but a couple of us with scoop shovels could take care of the situation.

But in the last year and a half, I have come to really appreciate the tireless dedication of the men and women that make up our Wildland Fire Division based in the Black Hills. As one of the seven divisions of the South Dakota Department of Agriculture, they cooperate with local volunteer fire departments, independent contractors, and the U.S. Forest Service fire crews to protect the lives and property of our State's citizens.

When the situation gets real serious, they morph into one of the 33 National Type II Incident command teams with not only local, but also, regional responsibilities. In the past few months, they have answered calls to Wyoming (twice) and Colorado to help battle fires.

Their most recent assignment was on the Rosebud Indian Reservation where they coordinated 600 personnel with ground and aerial resources to battle a fire that burned over 43,000 acres with no structures lost...an amazing accomplishment!

Last year's tragic loss of one of our own, and recently, the four airmen from a crash of the North Carolina Air National Guard C-130 helping us fight one of our fires, underscores the danger and risk inherent of firefighting, regardless of the location.

When our crews are not fighting fires, they are mitigating the dangers of wildland fire by thinning and removing fuels, going to training and conducting numerous training exercises for the volunteer fire departments all across South Dakota.

As of Aug. 1, there have been 1,469 fires reported here in South Dakota, burning over 226,000 acres, making this one of the most active fires seasons on record. An average year burns about 52,000 acres.

I don't take fires for granted anymore and with our dry weather persisting, we are not out of the "fire season" yet. So, the next time you see your local public safety officials, thank them for putting their lives on the line for you, your family and your property.

Walt

