

Officials seek money to thin forests, thwart wildfires

BY JoANNE YOUNG / Lincoln Journal Star
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The fires moved within seconds, the wind hurling burning debris thousands of feet to spread flames in scattered areas of northwest Nebraska forests.

The forests were ripe for destruction, with acres upon acres of undergrowth — small trees and shrubs that grow beneath the taller, older trees — and fallen needles and stems and dead branches.

And with the forests could go the towns, college campuses, state recreation areas, scenic river habitat and wildlife, including elk, deer, big horn sheep, song birds and eagles.

If not for a last-minute change in weather and shift in wind, the state could have lost the Niobrara River town of Valentine in July, said state forester Scott Josiah.

And without luck and the hard work of firefighters more than a week later, the state could be talking about how to rebuild Chadron State College.

Last summer's wildfires spared towns and the college but consumed tens of thousands of acres of forest, at least 14 homes and a bed-and-breakfast. And it damaged other private property. Fighting the fire cost more than \$6 million. The cost of destroyed or damaged residences, infrastructure and timber added several million more.

Josiah and Nebraska emergency management personnel came to the Capitol last week to ask the state to spend \$850,000 in the next two years, with \$1 million from the U.S. Forest Service and \$500,000 from private landowners, to prevent fires.

The chance of wildfires happening again is "certain," Josiah said.

Wildfire experts can't control high temperatures, low humidity and dry lightning or long periods of drought that make forest material tinder dry. They can't stop communities from crawling closer and closer to the forest. But they can help prevent or slow the damage caused by such fires.

The Niobrara Valley and Pine Ridge areas contain dense stands of highly flammable pine and cedar trees and woody undergrowth two to four times the natural levels, according to Josiah. Thinning the forests and burning undergrowth in controlled ways is the only sure way to control any future fires, he said.

It would help protect \$500 million in private property, including 10 communities. It would help protect 15,000 people and many acres of public land.

California saw this weekend how quickly wildfires can start. A fire ignited by a burning car in southern California had charred more than 2,000 acres by Sunday night, destroyed at least four buildings and forced the evacuation of about 1,200 people.

Last summer's multiple fires in Nebraska started by lightning in the steep forested canyons of the Pine Ridge and by an electrical wire rubbing against a pine in the Niobrara area.

The fires in the Chadron and Harrison areas got the attention of the U.S. Forest Service after they were proclaimed the No. 1 priority in the western states for two weeks.

"It was a big deal," Josiah said.

Most pressing to Nebraska forest officials, because of the intensity and speed of the fires, is the safety of crews that fight the fires. Racing wildfires are beyond the experience of many of them.

"We were very, very lucky not to have lost a firefighter or crew," Josiah said. "One of the major concerns is the risk that firefighters are facing."

Thinning provides pathways to make it easier to fight the fires. Fires lose intensity in thinned forests. It removes debris and buildup in tall trees and increases the spacing between trees to prevent fire from racing 100 feet up the trees and moving through their crowns. Fires near the ground are easier to contain.

Eilene Brannon, Cherry County emergency management director, said the wildfire that burned up to the north edge of Valentine wouldn't have been such a danger without the added fuel of invasive cedars and undergrowth.

Homes in the canyons and on ridge tops, especially if they have limited access of pathways, have no chance in a wildfire, she said.

"It was very scary on Sunday night," Brannon said. "When people evacuated in the northeast part of town, they thought they would never see their homes again."

And it could have taken miles of the Niobrara River corridor, she said.

It took 60 volunteer fire departments and a 100-member ground crew from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to put out the Valentine-area fire.

Mechanical thinning costs about \$300 an acre, Josiah said. Low-quality, short-diameter trees are cut, piled and chipped. The chips can be used in various projects. For example, Chadron State College uses the chips as fuel to steam heat and cool its campus.

Part of the money would pay for two people to administer the program in the Chadron and Valentine areas, working with both landowners and contractors.

With drought conditions, Nebraska's fire season appears to be getting longer and longer, Josiah said. Usually, it starts about June but could start earlier, as California's has.

"As it gets drier and hotter, lately it's going well into the fall," he said.

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