



COLBY FREE PRESS

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A barn owned by Diane Bremer went up in flames Tuesday after a fire tore through Decatur County. Firefighters from the Decatur County Fire Department tried to control the flames of a fire that burned about 7,000 acres.

STEPHANIE DeCAMP/Oberlin Herald

Four fires break out in Decatur

By Stephanie DeCamp
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Four separate fires ripped through Decatur County destroying fields, barns and farm machinery starting after lunch Tuesday and continuing into Wednesday.

The fire, which ate across an estimated 7,000 acres of field, pasture and crops, sent six people to the Decatur County Hospital; all were admitted.

Hospital Administrator Lynn Doeden said the patients were seen for smoke inhalation and heat exhaustion, and one person was treated for burnt eyes from the smoke and ash.

The first and largest of the fires was started when a driver had car trouble and pulled over to the side of U.S. 36 into green grass about 7 miles west of town. The fire quickly jumped to the field. The main fire started north of U.S. 36.

A second fire was called in later in the afternoon south of town, a third fire, reported that evening, was a mile and a half north of the first fire and at 4:30 a.m. today, another fire was reported at a farm-

stead southwest of town.

All fire stations from Decatur County responded as well as those from Rawlins County, Sheridan County, Red Willow County, Neb., Culbertson, Neb., and Beaver Valley, Neb., said Decatur County Fire Chief Bill Cathcart.

Decatur County Commissioners called an emergency meeting this morning to ban the sale and shooting off of fireworks in Decatur County. Oberlin City Mayor Bill Riedel also signed an order banning and selling fireworks in Oberlin.

Oberlin's Dollar General served as a donation spot on Tuesday for water, food and Gatorade for volunteers in the field. Donations came in from all over the county and surrounding counties into the evening hours.

Local merchants donated food and drinks as well as time to help hand out water and turn a spade in the field.

Almost 24 hours after the first call came in, the Decatur County firefighters were still in the field dealing with hot spots from the blaze.

Water watch expected here

Please conserve water! That's the message Colby residents need to hear from the city's water department this week.

The City of Colby is expecting to implement the municipal water conservation plan which goes into effect during drought or emergency conditions Thursday, according to Administrative Assistant Jo Strange.

The plan, which has three levels geared to various levels of use,

will enter Stage One, or a Water Watch, if water use for today exceeds 3.5 million gallons, which it is expected to do.

In a water watch, residents are asked to curtail some outdoor water use and to make efficient use of water indoors. These measures are considered voluntary, though if the excessive heat and drought continue, enforcement is authorized.

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Colorado Springs blaze halts assessing damage

By Lynn DeBruin
and P. Solomon Banda
Associated Press

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. (AP) — Authorities say it remains too dangerous for them to fully assess the damage from a destructive wildfire threatening Colorado's second-largest city.

Colorado Springs emergency management director Brett Waters said Wednesday morning that officials don't know how many houses have been destroyed in the blaze that has forced mandatory evacuations for more than 32,000

residents.

The fire is nowhere near contained, but incident commander Rich Harvey says firefighters have been able to establish and maintain a line of protection in some areas.

Fire information officer Rob Dyerberg says the blaze doubled in size to about 24 square miles overnight Tuesday into today.

Thunderstorms are expected in the afternoon, but Harvey says they could bring unpredictable winds that would hinder firefighters' efforts near the city of 419,000 people.



A grandson of the Schroeders (above) drove the perimeter of a field fire with water Monday to try and control the blaze in a draw on County Rd. AA near Road 20, about seven miles north of Colby. The fire began at about 2:50 p.m. and burned about 150 acres in about an hour and a half. A farmer used his tractor (right) to rake the area to turn up the dirt around the edges of the fire to stop the fire's progress. "That is one of the greatest assets we have," Assistant Fire Chief Sean Hankin said of raking the ground around the edges. He said four or five tractors were used during the fire Monday.

KAYLA CORNETT
Colby Free Press



Field fire outside Colby burns 150 acres

By Kayla Cornett
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An overheated transformer on a power pole on County Rd. Z started a field fire Monday that burned about 150 acres of land owned by the Schroeders and the Shulls.

Sean Hankin, assistant fire chief, who was in charge on the call, said the fire department received a call about the fire from Stephen Shull at 2:50 p.m. The fire started six miles north of Road 20.

Hankin said a transformer on a power pole overheated, dropping hot material onto the

ground and causing the field to catch fire. He said a representative from Midwest Energy confirmed that was the cause.

"It burned into the wind to the south, but the southeastern wind pushed it north to County Rd. AA," Hankin said, "and it extended almost a full mile throughout that draw."

He said he arrived on the scene a little after 3 p.m., and the fire was already coming right up the road toward them and was already in the north pasture.

The north pasture is owned by the Schroeders while the south pasture is owned by the Shulls.

Hankin said when they were first responding, they were looking for a downed power line be-

cause it's not uncommon for that to start a fire.

He said the area was tricky to work in because cattle graze in there, so it was all fenced in.

"We were kind of working through a maze like that," he said. "We were just working fence rows to the west in between the two pastures, just to make sure the wooden fence posts were out and not smoldering in an effort to save those posts and those fences."

Colby had three trucks working on the fire, but a couple of issues led Hankin to call for additional tankers.

The department received assistance from Gem, which sent one truck; Rexford, which sent

three; and Rawlins County, which also sent three.

Hankin said one issue was when one of the Colby trucks experienced vapor lock while fighting the fire, which is when gasoline can't make it to the engine so the engine stalls. He told a firefighter to leave his truck because of the extreme conditions.

He said vapor lock often occurs because their trucks have older carbureted engines.

He said they were operating in the black, or the areas that are already burned, so he wasn't worried about the flames being a danger to the firefighter, but

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Thomas County undersheriff accused of misspending money

By Christina Beringer
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A 10-week experience at the prestigious FBI National Academy in Quantico, Va., ended with a less-than-happy return home for Thomas County Undersheriff Marc Finley, as he arrived amidst some accusations he had misspent county money.

Sheriff Rod Taylor reported that Finley has agreed to pay back about \$1,600 of his \$6,200 trip expenses. Most of that was

spent at restaurants throughout his stay, the sheriff said.

Sheriff Taylor told the *Colby Free Press* that Finley was selected to attend an elite course for leaders in the law enforcement field. Because his office was somewhat surprised by the selection, he said, there was no money set aside for the trip in the sheriff's budget.

None of the trip has been paid for with tax money, Taylor said; the expenses will be paid from the Drug Forfeiture Fund. He said that money is a direct result of

the department's work, including Finley's work on many drug cases over the course of his 10-year employment.

Taylor said he sat down with Finley after his return to go over the bills because he thought meals would be covered at the academy, and they are.

Finley said that after a few meals, he just had to get out of the cafeteria. He added that students were encouraged to go out for meals and socialize because of the unique opportunity for networking the academy gives them.

Bridget Patton, a spokesperson for the FBI in Kansas City, said, "the academy is an excellent mechanism for liaison purposes. Networking and building ties to other departments is crucial to creating lasting partnerships with law enforcement officials throughout the nation and abroad and for supporting one another."

Taylor said that Finley should have known better and should not have put those expenses on the county credit card to begin with. However, he said, the situation is being "righted" and Finley has

agreed to repay the county.

Other expenses the undersheriff reported for the trip include mileage to and from Virginia, which will be reimbursed from federal money; hotel stays during his trip; uniforms; and other required supplies.

Taylor said the undersheriff had to buy a new laptop computer and software

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