March 2022 in Review

Votaw Road Wildfire—Lincoln County

Votaw Road Wildfire

Lincoln County
We envision safer, less vulnerable communities in Nebraska made possible through effective collaborative partnerships committed to saving lives and reducing the impact of disasters.

Our mission is to coordinate, support and serve Nebraska through an effective and relevant emergency management agency.

The need for vigilance and a strong commitment to cybersecurity has clearly been heightened in recent weeks. Emergency managers, local governments, utility providers and private industry are wise to heed the advisories distributed by our partners at the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) Region 7. Among the advisories recently distributed is the Shields Up | CISA webpage that provides actionable information on urgent steps to harden systems given the heightened threat environment.

CISA encourages organizations to remain vigilant and lower the threshold for reporting. If you believe that your jurisdiction, or a critical infrastructure partner, has experienced a cyber intrusion, please report incidents and anomalous activity to CISA (Central@cisa.gov; 1-888-282-0870) and/or the FBI’s 24/7 CyWatch at (855) 292-3937 or CyWatch@fbi.gov.

Finding the right person for the job can be a difficult task for any agency or organization. It’s even more challenging with Nebraska’s low unemployment rate. Recruitment and retention are difficult in times of low unemployment and all Nebraska employers are competing for the best talent. We recently interviewed several outstanding candidates for two Recovery Section positions. I am happy to announce that two of our own were selected to fill leadership roles in the agency. Lexy Hindt, a program specialist II in our Hazard Mitigation Unit, was named recovery section manager, and Kyle Winchell, a program specialist II in the Public Assistance Unit was named that unit’s supervisor.

The on-boarding process was almost immediate with Hindt and Winchell assuming their new responsibilities on March 28. Their knowledge of the programs, challenges and opportunities enables both to hit the ground running. Of course, this creates other challenges such as replacing their knowledge, skills and abilities in their previous roles, particularly relating to and managing hazard mitigation and public assistance projects for local applicants.

With persistent and increasing drought conditions across Nebraska, the expected early start to the wildfire season was already underway on March 16 when the Nebraska Incident Management Assistance Team deployed to the Votaw Road Fire in Lincoln County. Local emergency managers across the state have been busy on nearly 40 wildfires during March alone. Now is the time for every Nebraskan to be aware of the critical fire danger potential across the state.

Nationally, almost 9 out of 10 wildfires are caused by humans. These preventable wildfires threaten lives, property and our natural resources. We all play a valuable role in preventing wildfires and protecting our natural resources. Here are a few tips to help prevent wildfires:

- Check weather and drought conditions.
- If you must build a campfire, make sure it’s in an open location far away from flammables.
- Douse your campfire until it’s cold.
- Keep vehicles off dry grass.
- Make sure not to operate equipment that produces sparks near dry vegetation.
- Practice vehicle safety. Carry a shovel, bucket and fire extinguisher in you vehicle to put out fires.
- Cautiously burn debris and never do so when it’s windy or restricted. Make sure you have water nearby and always get the proper permits.

Sincerely,

Ervin L. Portis
Assistant Director
The Votaw Road Fire, in southern Lincoln County, outside the town of Wellfleet, started March 15, burning approximately 900 acres in rugged canyons filled with red cedar trees.

Approximately 25 fire departments responded from local communities, along with several state assets including the Wildland Incident Response Assistance Team (WIRAT), the Nebraska Incident Management Assistance team, Nebraska Emergency Management Agency, and the Nebraska National Guard.

The Nebraska National Guard flew in buckets of water with two UH60 and a CH 47 to enhance firefighting efforts.

"While air support helped to put out the fire, the rugged and highly inaccessible terrain made it difficult, if not impossible, to put a containment line around the perimeter," said Dave Reisen, NEMA's field team leader.

"The area contained steep narrow canyons, dry cedar trees, heavy dried fuels, and a dried canopy," he said. "We were able to maintain the fire's footprint but were unable to get a containment line around the exterior."

The IMAT demobilized on March 21 and local responders completed mop up.

From left, Danelle Nelson and Tami Reynolds of NEMA work as the admin/finance section at the Votow Road Fire in Lincoln County.

NEMA Recover Staff Open Task Books to Assist with Incident Management Team

NEMA Program Specialist Tami Reynolds got her first experience working as part of an Incident Management Assistance Team (IMT) with her deployment to the Votaw Road Wildfire in Lincoln County on March 16.

Reynolds has opened her finance/administration section chief task book and is working to qualify in that position.

Her inclusion on the team is of special note because she is one of the first Recovery Section staff members to open a task book to earn certification for an IMT. In addition, Lexy Hindt, section manager, has opened her logistics section chief task book and John Cook, hazard mitigation program specialist, has opened his communications unit leader (Comm-L) task book.

"NEMA is making a concerted effort to train a variety of staff in IMT positions," said Recovery Section Administrator Donny Christensen. "It makes sense to include staff from the Recovery Section in the process right from the beginning since we will be working with those affected by disaster long after the event has occurred."

The more credentialed people who can serve on an IMT/IMAT means better preparedness for the state, Christensen said.

"In the event we have more than one incident occurring at the same time, we will need more than one finance section chief or one logistics section chief," said Reynolds. "We all need to be prepared."

"Finance is what I do every single day at NEMA," Reynolds said. "I end up with all the paperwork at the end of an event and I know the proper documentation needed for final payments. It was a win-win situation to be involved right from the beginning."

Reynolds said it was great to see how the lessons from ICS 300 (Intermediate Incident Command System for Expanding Incidents) actually work in the field.

"Attending evening briefs, seeing how the logistics section chief orders needed resources and seeing the beginning of the process instead of just sending out final payments without seeing how everything began was a great learning experience."

Reynolds said meeting firefighters and fire chiefs she works with following a wildfire was helpful.

"I was able to put names with faces," Reynolds said. "It was beneficial for them and for me."

"When we came over the hill and saw the Incident Command Post with all the fire equipment parked there, I was amazed," Reynolds said. "I’ve never experienced anything like it. I’m a city girl. It really put things into perspective."
Save Dates for School EOP Workshops in June, August

The Nebraska Department of Education has contracted in its U.S. Department of Education Grant to offer 90-minute tabletop exercises with schools, emergency managers, law enforcement, and fire/rescue.

As part of the department's School Emergency Operations Plan (EOP) initiative, school safety teams across the state have been invited to attend one or more of the following virtual 2022 Nebraska School Tabletop Exercises. Please save the dates for the dates listed below. Registration will open in late April.

- June 8, 9:30-11 a.m., Scenario: Bus accident
- June 8, 2-3:30 p.m., Scenario: Tornado
- June 9, 2-3:30 p.m., Scenario: Threat outside during a track meet
- Aug. 23, 9:30-11 a.m., Scenario: Bus accident
- Aug. 23, 2-3:30 p.m., Scenario: Tornado
- Aug. 25, 9:30-11 a.m., Scenario: Threat outside during a track meet
- Aug. 23, 2-3:30 p.m., Scenario: Tornado

The 2-day EOP training has already trained more than 200 public and non-public schools in developing, updating and modifying their district according to Scott Stemper, emergency operations planning specialist in the department's school safety and security office of coordinated student support services.

"The partnerships with local emergency managers have been vital in this process," Stemper said. "In June 2022, we will have three trainings remaining with the final 3 Education Service Unit (ESUs) regions. So, we will have trained schools in all 17 ESUs in Nebraska. Our hope is we will come back through the state and provide EOP training with the remaining districts who did not originally attend with their ESU. We have 244 public and about 110 non-public schools in Nebraska. 200 trained districts from June 2020 – June 2021 was a great result.

The exercises center on a school or school district’s EOP and leads teams through a scenario and planning related to specific sections of the EOP. This exercise has been designed for schools that have an existing EOP and those working to develop an EOP. Participants do not need to have a completed EOP to participate in the exercises.

Please distribute this invitation to members of school safety and emergency planning teams. This exercise is sponsored by the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center in collaboration with the Nebraska Department of Education School Safety Section.

Please contact Luisa Del Castillo (ldelcastillo2@unl.edu) at the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center with any questions about this training opportunity.

Poster Contest Winners Honored

NEMA Assistant Director Erv Portis announced the winners of the annual Severe Weather Awareness Contest in a ceremony at the Nebraska Capitol, March 5. The winning and honorable mention posters will be featured in NEMA’s 2022 Severe Weather Awareness Calendar. Pictured from left are: first place, Sophie Rakes, 8, Southern Public Schools, Blue Springs, Gage County, for her poster, “What to Do During a Tornado;” second place, Mary White, 9, Gretna Elementary School, Gretna, Sarpy County for her poster, “Be Prepared Storms Pop Up Anywhere”; third place Abigail Strikivsky, 9, Fredstrom Elementary School, Lincoln, Lancaster County, for her poster, “What to Do v. What Not to Do During a Tornado;” and fourth place, Morgan Ebel, 9, Creighton Community School Creighton, Knox County for her poster, “Be Ready, Be Safe, Go Inside Just in Case.” Honorable Mention went to: Hayden Christensen, 9, Prairie Queen Elementary School, Papillion, Sarpy County; Addison Dinnitt, 9, Fredstrom Public Schools, Lincoln, Lancaster County; Cora Dobbe, 8, Loveland Elementary School, Omaha, Douglas County; Avery Mader, 9, 1R Elementary School, Grand Island, Hall County; Violet Pavlik, 8, Verdigre Elementary, Verdigre, Knox County; Olivia Placke, 9 Centura Public School, Cairo, Howard County; Baya Reynolds, 9, Fredstrom Elementary School, Lincoln, Lancaster County; Ezra Tanner, 9, Fredstrom Elementary School, Lincoln, Lancaster County; and Zayd Wortuan, 9, Wynot Elementary School, Wynot, Cedar County.
Members of the NEMA Technical Hazards Unit ran a full-day in-house Radiological Emergency Preparedness (REP) exercise on March 15 at the State Emergency Operations Center at NEMA. This exercise was to simulate what a real response to a Cooper Nuclear Station incident would look like. The exercise was designed to test and validate communications and coordination of tasks, actions and activities that various departments and agencies are responsible for at both state and local levels. Local Emergency Management, SEOC and Joint Information Center staff participated.

Deb Robinson and Mack Johnson of NEMA conducted radiological training in Chappell on March 23. The shortened version of the Modular Emergency Response Radiological Transport course provides information on response to transportation accidents involving radiological materials. NEMA offers these trainings to responders along the I-80 corridor. The course offers basic understanding of radiological hazards and safety, and teaches the responders to monitor for the presence of radiological material.
Deadline Approaches

The U.S. Small Business Administration reminds small nonfarm businesses in three Nebraska Counties of the April 27 deadline to apply for an SBA federal disaster loan for economic injury.

These low-interest loans are to offset losses because of reduced revenues caused by drought in the following primary counties that began August 24, 2021. The primary Nebraska county is Dakota County with the neighboring Nebraska counties Dixon and Thurston also included.

Applicants may apply online, receive additional disaster assistance information and download applications at https://disaster-loanassistance.sba.gov/. SBA’s Customer Service Center is (800) 659-2955.

State of Nebraska staff instrumental in the creation of Nebraska’s Type 3 Incident Management Team were recognized at the annual State Fire Marshal Agency meeting March 1 in Kearney. From left, Erv Portis, NEMA; Roger Conrad, NEMA; Mark Frickel, Nebraska Forest Service (NFS); Justin Nickless, NFS; Chris Cantrell, State Fire Marshal (SFM); John Erixson, NFS; Matt Holte, NFS; Dave Reisen, NEMA; Ralph Moul, SFM; Allen Michel, SFM; Earl Imier, NEMA; Pat Gould, NFM; Leo Larkin, NEMA; and Gov. Pete Ricketts.
G-393 Hazard Mitigation for Emergency Managers was offered in Norfolk, March 29-31 at the Norfolk Public Library. Marisa Alvares and Larry Fichtner of NEMA taught the course which trains the non-technical emergency worker to acquire skills in the use of mitigation. The course provides training in how to perform mitigation activities fundamental to reducing and eliminating long-term risk from hazards and addresses the important roles of the emergency program manager in mitigation. Participants learned to analyze reasons for differences between optimal and actual mitigation roles of the emergency program manager. They also discussed evaluating the effectiveness of a community's mitigation planning efforts and recommended actions for optimizing the mitigation role of the emergency program manager.

Leadership Kearney and Youth Leadership Kearney representatives visited the Nebraska National Guard and Nebraska Emergency Management Agency on March 8, to hear from Adjutant Gen. Daryl Bohac, above, and NEMA Assistant Director Erv Portis, left. Leadership Kearney was created to identify, educate and nurture potential, emerging and existing leaders who are committed to improving the quality of life in Kearney and the surrounding communities. Bohac and Portis gave an overview of how the Nebraska Military Department, which includes NEMA, helps respond to emergencies and disasters in support of all Nebraskans.
Three-Day Search Operation Conducted Near Table Rock

The Nebraska State Patrol completed a three-day search operation as part of the ongoing investigation into the disappearance of Linda Dillard.

Although the search effort did not locate Dillard’s remains, significant ground was covered and will assist in the investigation.

The search operation included partners from multiple states including Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, and Nebraska State Patrol. NEMA assisted in coordinating volunteers for the Linda Dillard search.

Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) Detected in Nebraska

HPAI is a highly contagious virus that spreads easily among birds through nasal and eye secretions, as well as manure.

Wild birds can carry the virus without becoming sick, while domesticated birds can become very sick. The farms are under NDA quarantine and the birds will be depopulated.

NDA established a 6.2-mile control zone around the infected premises. Premises with poultry that fall within that control zone will not be allowed to move birds or poultry products on or off their property without permission from NDA. These producers should also know the signs and symptoms of HPAI and notify NDA immediately of sick or dying poultry.