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July 3, 2012

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Public Record

Dear Ms Brown,

As you may be aware, massive wildfires are affecting Montana and the West. One significant fire is in southeastern Montana. The Ash Creek wildfire is nearly 200,000 acres in size and has been burning for a week. This fire is directly impacting Ashland, Otter Creek, Broadus, and the Tongue River area where many of our members who are concerned about the Tongue River Railroad live and ranch. Many of these residents have lost grassland, cattle, fences, and even homes. Some are under evacuation orders from the Incident Command managing the fire.

Under these circumstances, residents Rosebud and Powder River counties will have difficulty complying with the July 18 deadline for submitting a request to be added to the service list as a party of record for FD-30186-0.

Northern Plains Resource Council is requesting a 60-day extension to the deadline for filing as a party of record. Under these significant adverse circumstances, we believe this is a reasonable request. We have included a number of articles from local newspapers for your information and to support our request considering the enormity of this disaster.

If you have questions with this request, please contact Northern Plains at (406) 248-1154.

Sincerely,

Walter Archer
Chair, Board of Directors
Northern Plains Resource Council



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Governor issues emergency order for fires; Type 1 team to arrive this evening



JUNE 27, 2012 6:46 AM • GAZETTE STAFF

Two fire-retardant airplane bombers began dropping chemicals on the Dahl and Hawk Creek fires near Roundup on Wednesday and a third plane is expected.

Officials say the lightning-caused fires have consumed more than 20,500 acres since record heat and high winds fanned them to life Tuesday.

A dry, hot spring has created fire conditions in Musselshell County that aren't normally seen until August. Tuesday, the fires burning through dry forest and sparse undergrowth spread as quickly as eight miles an hour.

Most of the land burned is a mixture of private property and tracts assigned to the Bureau of

Land Management or the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation.

There were two DNRC helicopters on the blaze Wednesday.

A Type 1 incident team is expected to arrive in the next few hours to take over management of the Dahl fire.

Musselshell County Sheriff Woody Weitzel said Wednesday morning at least one person is unaccounted for and numerous animals have been lost to the fire.

There are several animals severely injured from the fire. Officials face the problem of not knowing who the animals belong to so they are not permitted to put the animals out of their misery, Weitzel said.

Jolene Sealey, Musselshell's deputy of emergency services, said hot spots have begun to burn

again in the Buckskin Road and Harper Coulee Road areas.

Musselshell County Disaster and Emergency Services Coordinator Jeff Gates said a Type 1 incident management team will arrive this evening to take over the fire.

Gates, who had been out on the fire most of the day, said that any size estimates of the fire are a rough guess until full mapping is complete.

State fire management officials said at a noon press conference at Billings Logan International Airport that the Signal Peak coal mine has been given extra protection against the Dahl fire.

Bob Harrington of the state Department of Natural Resources and Conservation also said that larger firefighting aircraft had been requested, including a modified DC-10 tanker capable of delivering 20,000 gallons of retardant.

The aircraft were expected later Wednesday and would be deployed first on the Dahl fire, he said.

Gov. Brian Schweitzer said at the press conference, "We are not going to put firefighters in front of these fires."

Schweitzer earlier issued an executive order proclaiming an emergency in Musselshell, Rosebud, Treasure, Custer, Big Horn and Yellowstone counties, plus the Northern Cheyenne Reservation, because of hazardous wildfires burning.

The governor plans a press conference for noon Wednesday at Edwards Jet Center in Billings on the Dahl fire and the Ash fire burning in Rosebud and Powder River counties.

He plans to fly over the areas that are on fire.

Officials in Musselshell County are asking people who may have had property damaged by the fire not to go back into the fire area.

Property owners are instructed to stay in town and not return to their homes.

Also, a local fund for victims of the Musselshell County fires has been established. Donations may be made out to Roundup 2012 Fire Relief Fund, in care of First Security Bank, P.O. Box 100, Roundup, MT, 59702.

Shelters for evacuees have been opened at St. Benedict's Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church in Roundup, in addition to the Red Cross Shelter at the Community Center, officials said in this 10:30 a.m. update.

Henry Memmen was one of the evacuees who stayed in a shelter overnight. His home was destroyed Tuesday afternoon in a firestorm that swept through his neighborhood on Shortcut Road.

Memmen said he saw flames about a quarter mile away at midafternoon.

"I just grabbed my dog and got out of there," he said.

He said that a lot of his neighbors probably lost livestock to the fire.

Six people stayed Tuesday night in a Red Cross shelter set up at the Roundup Community Center, Diane Wright, spokesman for the American Red Cross of Montana, said in a 10 a.m. update.

Harvest Church in Billings at 1235 W. Wicks Lane is on standby in case more shelter space is needed.

"The Red Cross called me last night at 11:30," said the Rev. George Burgin, campus pastor for the church's Heights campus. "We actually opened the building last night, but I don't believe anyone came. It was so late."

Harvest has full shower facilities and room for hundreds. The church is getting blankets and cots from the Red Cross in Bozeman, and members are stepping up to help out providing food, Burgin said.

He also wants people to know that the church campus is pet-friendly.

"We want people to be able to hold on to their loved pets," Burgin said. "We know that's an issue for people."

Wright said Red Cross resources across Montana are being tapped and urges the public to help.

Credit card donations can be made at 1-800-272-6668 or online at www.montanaredcross.org.

In a 9:30 a.m. update, fire officials said they are still trying to determine the amount of property damage caused by the Dahl fire.

Tom Giles, deputy DES coordinator for Musselshell County, said this morning firefighters were doing a house-to-house survey of some of the neighborhoods in the fire's path.

He said residents are not being allowed back into the burned area yet. Highway 87 is likely to remain closed all day.

According to the National Weather Service, the 9 a.m. temperature at Roundup was 64 degrees with winds from the southwest at 22 mph. Relative humidity is at 22 percent. High temperature is forecast at 86 degrees, significantly cooler than Tuesday's high of 99 degrees.

However, temperatures are expected to hit the 90s on Thursday and stay there through the weekend.

The Dahl fire south of Roundup has grown to 18,751 acres, according to a 7:30 a.m. update from fire authorities Wednesday.

The Montana Department of Transportation reported at 8 a.m. that Highway 87 remained

closed south of Roundup and that flames were going across.

Evacuation orders are now in effect for the following areas: Harper Coulee, Alpine, Buckskin, Grassy Flat, Bradley, Shortcut, Old Cabin, Scenic Way, McCord, Hampton, Aspen, Three Forks, Dillman, Canyon, Johnny Cole, Pleasant Grove, Beard, Rehder, East Parrot Creek, Bruner Mountain, Otter Trail, Hidden Springs, South Fattig Creek, Old Divide and Majerus.

Earlier reports that the Branding Iron Saloon had burned were determined to be incorrect.

In a 5 a.m. update, Paula Short, with the state Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, said that fire crews worked until 2:30 a.m. Wednesday as the blaze remained active despite cooler temperatures.

Fire officials plan to fly over the fire Wednesday morning to assess the size of the fire, which she said was 15,000 to 18,000 acres, and extent of damage to structures.

"We are bracing for another tough day," she said, with temperatures expected to be in the 90s, gusty winds blowing 30-35 mph and humidity in single digits.

Officials will be trying to contact homeowners to learn more about their losses.

Alerts

Sign up for breaking wildfire news alerts by texting 'GazNews' to 724-665 or visit [Facebook.com/montanawildfires](https://www.facebook.com/montanawildfires)

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Red Lodge center helps displaced Ashland residents



17 HOURS AGO • BY CLAIR JOHNSON
CLAIR JOHNSON



CJOHNSON@BILLINGSGAZETTE.COM

When the order came on June 26 to evacuate Ashland because of the fast-moving Ash Creek fire, residents of Heritage Living Center, an assisted living facility primarily for Northern Cheyenne elders, had to go, too.

Nineteen of the residents spent the first night at the Boys and Girls Club in Lame Deer, sleeping in chairs or on the floor.

The next two nights, the residents stayed at the Country Inn in Billings, where Mike Skaggs, president and CEO of Soaring Eagle, the organization that operates Heritage Living, had made arrangements for 14 rooms.

“We just doubled up,” Skaggs said.

Then St. John’s Lutheran Ministries in Billings stepped up, Skaggs said, and offered to have the residents stay at its new, assisted-living center in Red Lodge called The Willows.

By last Friday afternoon, nearly 40 people, including the residents along with staff and some of their family, had moved into the Willows.

On Monday, many of the Heritage Living residents were visiting and exchanging stories in a roomy dining area as staff prepared sandwiches and soup for lunch.

Edna Seminole said she was glad to be in Red Lodge where the air was clear. Smoke from the wildfire had made it difficult for her to breathe and she had to go to the clinic for treatment, she said.

A nine-year resident of Heritage Living, Seminole said she was able to grab a few things but

forgot her shampoo before evacuating. Seminole said she was worried about her grandson, a firefighter on the Ash Creek fire.

"We never thought we'd be in that situation ever," said Mary Stillsmoking, and her husband, Joseph Stillsmoking, were among those evacuated from Heritage Living.

They could feel the heat from the fire and "the smoke was awful," Mary Stillsmoking said.

On Monday the Rev. Emmett Hoffmann, a Heritage Living resident and the center's founder, paid the group a visit and offered the blessing as lunch was served.

Hoffmann had left Ashland about a week earlier to be treated in Billings for pneumonia. Skaggs brought Hoffmann, a popular priest at the St. Labre Mission School in Ashland and known as Father Emmett, to Red Lodge for the visit.

Hoffmann called the Willows arrangement "perfect."

St. John's offered to help after hearing of the evacuation, said Shelley Pierce, St. John's foundation director. Within 24 hours, she said, St. John's arranged for the residents to go to Red Lodge and provided them with beds, linens, medical supplies and activities for kids.

St. John's coordinated with the Beartooth Billings Clinic, the American Red Cross and numerous volunteers in Red Lodge to prepare for the Ashland residents, Pierce said.

"It was truly an amazing thing to watch and see pulled together in such a short period of time," she said.

The Ashland residents are staying in the Willows' 12-unit Sojourner cottage, which was unoccupied, Pierce said.

"They made us feel very welcome. They've just been fantastic," Skaggs said.

The group was greeted at the door by Red Lodge resident who was a nurse and had lived in Ashland. "She knew everybody by name," Skaggs said.

When some of the Heritage Living residents went shopping at a Red Lodge thrift store, the managers, upon learning they had been displaced by the fire, said there was no charge for their items. "That made everybody feel more welcome," Skaggs said.

Heritage Living has 40 residents, the rest of whom went to Broadus or are staying with family or made other arrangements.

While the evacuation order for Ashland has been lifted, Skaggs said the residents will not be returning for at least a few more days until the threat of fire has eased and the air quality, which affects many of the residents, improves.



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Fire burning near Ashland grows to 100,000 acres



JUNE 27, 2012 6:45 AM • GAZETTE STAFF

Fire roaring across the Northern Cheyenne Reservation since Tuesday afternoon picked its victims at random.

"My house wasn't burned, but two neighbors 50 feet away were burned to the ground," said Allen Fisher, who was sheltering Wednesday with 50 others at the Northern Cheyenne Boys and Girls Club in Lame Deer.

Another 150, mostly from the Ashland area, spent the night at the school gym in Lame Deer.

Fire burned power lines, plunging most of the fire area including Ashland, Lame Deer, Busby and Broadus in the dark late Tuesday night, said Alan See, general manager of Tongue River Electric. Power was restored to Lame Deer and Busby early Wednesday afternoon, but will likely be out for at least until Friday at Broadus and Ashland, he said.

At a noon press conference Wednesday at the Billings airport, state fire officials said the Ash Creek fire was estimated to have grown to 100,000 acres.

Bob Harrington of the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation said conditions for the remainder of Wednesday were expected to be nearly as bad as those on Tuesday, despite cooler temperatures.

Eleven homes on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation and seven homes on private land have been destroyed by the fire, Harrington said.

It started 10 miles east of Lame Deer on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation but is now burning on state and private land off the reservation, she said. A force of 112 firefighters are on the lines.

Just after midnight Tuesday, the American Red Cross of Montana opened emergency shelters in Ashland, Lame Deer and Broadus, spokeswoman Diane Wright said in a 10 a.m. update Wednesday.

The Ashland Public School on U.S. 212 hosted about 30 evacuees as did a shelter at the Lame Deer Boys and Girls Club at 100 Cheyenne Ave. Wright said sometime Wednesday the

shelters probably will be combined.

She did not know if anyone stayed at the Broadus Elementary School shelter last night.

Harvest Church in Billings at 1235 W. Wicks Lane is on standby in case additional shelters are needed.

Wright said Red Cross resources are being tapped and she hopes Montanans will respond with donations.

"We having to pull disaster teams from all areas of the state to head east," she said.

Credit card donations can be made by calling 1-800-272-6668. Checks can be sent to American Red Cross of Montana at 1300 28th St. S., Great Falls, MT 59405. Online donations can be made at www.montanaredcross.org.

Several wildfires burning in Rosebud County have forced evacuations on and around the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation.

The Rosebud County Sheriff's Office said evacuations have been ordered in the Ashland and St. Labre areas and that homes have been destroyed in the fire, although an exact number wasn't available Wednesday morning.

Highway 212 into Ashland is closed because the bridges have been burned out.

The fires' exact size wasn't immediately available, but a sheriff's office spokeswoman said, "They've taken over quite a sizable area."

A Department of Natural Resources and Conservation team is expected to take over command of the firefighting efforts on Wednesday.

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Tuesday forecast concerns Ash Creek fire officials



3 HOURS AGO • BY ZACH BENOIT

ZACH BENOIT



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FOLLOW @ZACHBENOIT

10:30 A.M.: The Ash Creek fire is burning south of Highway 212 about a mile south of the North Fork of Threemile Creek and a mile west of Sonnette Road.

On the north side of the highway, the fire has reached Elk Ridge about a mile south of Stacey School.

Temperatures are forecast to hit 106 degrees Tuesday with relative humidity between 5 and 15 percent and with southerly winds at 10 to 20 mph. Later, the wind is expected to start blowing from the northwest at 15 to 25 mph with gusts of 35 mph. The same weather conditions last Monday ballooned the fire's size.

Results of infrared mapping Monday night are still being put together. For now the fire size hasn't changed from 186,800 acres.

Pat McKelvey, fire information officer, also said that the Type 1 incident command team being transferred from the Dahl fire near Roundup to the Horse Creek fire south of Hysham will also take over part of the Ash Creek fire.

The Type 2 team on the Ash Creek fire will continue to manage firefighting efforts east of the Tongue River. The Type 1 team will assume control west of the Tongue.

McKelvey said firefighters are expecting a bad afternoon.

7:30 A.M.: The Ash Creek fire burning in Rosebud and Powder River counties continued to actively move on Monday night. Fire officials are keeping a wary eye on possible shifts in the weather that could complicate their efforts at containment.

The fire has burned about 186,800 acres, although Pat McKelvey, fire information officer, said

crews performed an aerial survey overnight and expects that number to be updated to about 200,000.

"It was active overnight," he said. "It was active on the east and is trying to burn back around to the south."

Containment on Monday evening was estimated at 55 percent.

The National Weather Service has issued a red flag warning for most of southern, central and southeastern Montana, warning of high temperatures, low humidity and strong winds with gusts up to 45 mph. The winds will shift in the afternoon as a cold front moves in, which especially concerns fire officials.

"This weather today will give them the same fits that they've had," McKelvey said. "It'll be active again today."

Much of the fire's eastern edge, where it is most active, is hung up on a timber ridge, which makes it more difficult to directly attack. McKelvey said they hope the fire will make it down to the nearby prairie, which will make it easier to fight.

"The idea is to look for those opportunities to go and directly attack, especially where those fuels are lighter," he said.

The fire has been burning so fast and so hot in some areas that it's been tough for fire crews to directly fight it, he said. First and foremost, they're worried about firefighter safety and don't want anybody hurt or killed during the efforts.

"When you have that kind of erratic fire behavior going, you don't want to take any risks," he said. "We want to keep them safe."

OVERNIGHT REPORT: ASHLAND — Fire crews spent Monday battling erratic behavior on the Ash Creek fire, which has burned about 200,000 acres in Rosebud and Powder River counties.

Brian LaMoure, fire information officer, said Sunday night's containment estimate of 40 percent held Monday as the fire moved to the north and southeast.

Fueled by strong winds, high temperatures and low humidity — as it has been since the lightning-caused fire was first reported June 26 — the fire has been moving too fast for crews to feel comfortable getting in front of it.

"We've been told that it could move as fast as 4 mph," LaMoure said. "That's faster than some people can run."

As of Monday morning, officials counted 16 homes and 22 outbuildings destroyed by the fire. An evacuation order for Ashland was lifted over the weekend, allowing only residents to return to town through a roadblock on Highway 212 in Lame Deer, which is closed to the junction with Highway 59 near Broadus.

Late Sunday or early Monday, the fire crossed to the south side of Highway 212 east of Ashland near Home Creek, prompting officials to evacuate 16 more homes in the area.

The Black Hills Chapter of the American Red Cross has been placed on standby to open a shelter for people displaced by fires burning in the Ash Creek Complex near Broadus. Belle Fourche, S.D., though 95 miles away from Broadus, is one of the closer large towns, a straight shot southeast along U.S. Highway 212.

The fire burned several thousand additional acres. By noon Monday, the fire had made its way to a large hill about a quarter-mile from the road, where trees could be seen erupting in flame as white and gray smoke belched hundreds of feet into the air.

Blaine Fortner came from Billings to help his parents, Tim and Gaylene Fortner, protect their property in the Home Creek area. He spent Sunday night and Monday morning working frantically with neighbors to protect a handful of homes and buildings.

“We looked at it earlier in the evening and it was a couple of ridges away,” he said. “We thought we had a couple of days before it hit us, but then those winds picked it up.”

The flames reached the edge of the property by 1 a.m. Monday and were bearing down on the Fortners and a few gathered friends and neighbors, who were using heavy equipment to dig fire lines and pumpers to spray down buildings and yards.

“By the time it got over the ridge, I looked up and there was just a flaming wall of ash,” Fortner said. “That wall of fire behind it, I’ve never seen anything like it. It was coming down so fast. It wasn’t supposed to get here until today.”

He has spent the past three days — his dad logged four before taking a nap Monday afternoon — helping with the firefighting efforts.

After watching the flames race toward his parents’ home and working just yards away from them, Fortner said he’s relieved and a little surprised.

“I was 100 percent for sure that I was going to be a goner,” he said while standing on his grandparents’ deck about a mile west on Highway 212 and watching the fire work its way up a hill.

Near the Fortner property, Dwight Harding oversaw a 20-person Northern Cheyenne hand crew that was scouring the blackened area, putting out hot spots and watching for flare-ups.

Harding’s crew arrived over the weekend after traveling to a handful of fires around the region.

Earlier in the day, information officer Pat McKelvey said nine hours of sustained 20 mph winds, with gusts as high as 50 mph, complicated efforts Sunday, a trend that officials thought would continue Monday as the fire grew.

“The winds really did expand the fire line,” LaMoure said. “It’s been going so fast that its firefighters can’t attack it from the front. But now it’s moving into the prairie, where it’s less wooded and it’s easier to attack.”

He described the burn area, which extends into Powder River County and is about 25 miles from Broadus, as 20 miles wide and 30 miles long.

Officials are discussing whether to request a Type I fire command team, which would oversee efforts on several of the larger wildfires burning in the area, including those of the Type II team on the Ashland fire.

More than 500 firefighters are taking part in the efforts using numerous tenders, dozers and engines. Five helicopters also are assisting.

Most of the firefighters have moved from a command camp in Colstrip to a spike camp set up north of Ashland because it is closer to the fire and makes it easier for them to access the burn area.

McKelvey said later Monday that forecasts were for a "significant night of fire weather," including a possible shift in the wind that could come out of the east and blow the fire back in the direction of Ashland.

The Rapid City Journal contributed to this report.

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Ash Creek fire moving quickly, erratically

By ZACH BENOIT Billings Gazette | Posted: Tuesday, July 3, 2012 12:00 am

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JUL 03 2012

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ay, July 2, 2012

Miles City, Montana

New evacuations in area fires

From Associated Press and agency reports

BILLINGS (AP) — Two fast-moving wildfires — including a new one that tripled in size overnight — have triggered new evacuations in southeastern Montana.

Ranches and residences remain threatened, particularly in the Ashland/Broadus Divide near the leading edge of this fire.

Firefighters are battling a potent mix of lightning strikes, dry weather and flame-whip-

ping winds as they try to contain the 290-square-mile Ash Creek fire near Ashland and the 9-square mile Horse Creek fire south of Hysham. InciWeb fire reports size the fire at 6,000 acres, but Custer County Fire Chief Bud Peterson has received reports that the fire is closer to 20,000 acres now.

Authorities say the Ash Creek fire jumped Highway 212 west of Broadus

early Monday. The Powder River County Sheriff's Office was evacuating Sonnette and Ten Mile Creek roads.

It is at more than 170,000 acres and 40 percent containment.

The Coal Seam Fire, about six miles north of Busby, is part of the Ash Creek Complex. It is at 527 acres and 95 percent containment.

The Horse Creek fire near Hysham is the largest of more than a dozen fires sparked by week-

end lightning strikes. Authorities say it spread quickly Sunday and Monday to threaten houses, a natural gas pipeline and a transmission line in remote southeast Treasure County.

For the Ash Creek fire, public meetings are scheduled today in Ashland and Broadus. According to the Northern Rockies Incident Management Team, a meeting will be held at the St. Labre auditorium at 3 p.m.



Fires

Fire

See "Fire," page 5

Continued from page 1

All community members are welcome to attend to get an update on fire operations, fire behavior and weather forecasts. A meeting is also set in Broadus at 7 p.m. at Seabeck Theater.

For more information about the meetings or fire updates, visit Inciweb at www.inciweb.org, email ashcreekfireinfo@gmail.com or call fire information staff at 406-748-3061.

The Ashland Ranger District of the Custer National Forest in Rosebud and Powder River counties is under Stage 2 fire restrictions.

Additional evacuations in Busby and Broadus prompted

the Red Cross to open additional shelters. Area people may seek services at the Boys and Girls Club in Lame Deer, Broadus Elementary School, Ashland Public School and Powder River Manor in Broadus. Shelters also are open in Roundup and Red Lodge.

Anyone needing assistance should call 1-800-272-6668 and ask for the Red Cross Duty Officer.

The Red Cross is receiving financial and other donations to help serve people in need. According to a press release, there was a critical need for water and Gatorade on Friday.

One phone call to the Wal-Mart store manager in Miles City, Dana Adler, and relief was on the way. Spencer, a

Wal-Mart driver, volunteered to take the two pallets back to Broadus, arriving around midnight after an already long day at work. Cloud Peak Energy, with operations in Decker, and Central Montana



Fires

Resources, with offices in Billings, Lewistown, Miles City and Roundup, each donated \$5,000 to the Red Cross.

To make a credit card con-

tribution, call 1-800-272-6668. Donations by check should be made payable to "American Red Cross of Montana" and sent to the American Red Cross of Montana at 1300 28th Street South, Great Falls, MT 59405. Those wishing to donate online should visit www.montanaredcross.org.

If you have items like clothing or furniture to donate, consider instead donating your goods to a charity thrift store that is equipped to clean and store the items. Although your generosity is appreciated, Red Cross is asking everyone to not bring unsolicited goods to shelters.