

Wall of flames threaten firemen, Niobrara valley

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

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Local firefighters volunteer to battle Niobrara inferno

Al Ballmer and Rick Crown got off a four-seater plane the morning of July 25 bleary-eyed and smelling of smoke.

The two, members of the Gothenburg Volunteer Fire Department, had spent much of the past 24 hours battling one of three massive fires torching the Niobrara River Valley.

“It was scary at times,” Ballmer said about the wall of flames that often towered 40 feet.

At one point, Crown said the blaze got too close and “we couldn’t get it knocked down.”

“We had to evacuate along with the other trucks,” he said.

The fire fighters drove a grass rig to a staging area east of Springview on July 24 after the local department was asked to send manpower to help fight the fire.

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Sparked by lightning on July 20, the fires scorched more than 76,000 acres.

24-hour rotations

Fire chief Mark Ballmer organized volunteers who were flown to and from Ainsworth on a 24-hour rotation.

Pilot Rick Fiese flew fire fighters Keith Williamson and Travis Miller to Ainsworth last Wednesday where he picked up Al Ballmer and Crown.

By Thursday morning, when Williamson and Miller returned, Ballmer said the rotations had ended.

“The feds are running it now and are not really wanting fire trucks as much as heavy equipment (like bulldozers),” he said.



The evening before, when the local fire fighters got to the staging area, temperatures were still close to 100 degrees with gusting wind.

Helping to fuel the fire was tinder-dry pasture, they said, which is much drier than land around Gothenburg.

“They don’t have irrigation, it’s all dryland,” Ballmer said.

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Williamson said he and Crown fought the “middle” fire. He drove the rig and Crown sprayed water.

Towering infernos

About 80 volunteer fire departments and six helicopters have tried to douse the blaze which turned towering trees into matchsticks, they said.

Because of the ruggedness of the area, they said trucks were driven to the tops of ridges where fire fighters waited for the blaze to come to them.

Ballmer said they’d battle the fire for about 20 minutes and then wait for two to three hours until it flared up again.

The fire fighters said they heard reports of a grouse on fire and cattle with charred ears.

Although the fire reminded them of the wildfire that scorched grazing land south of Gothenburg and Brady in August of 2002, the Niobrara fires were much bigger, they said.

“Fire fighters were coming and going all time,” Ballmer said, noting that he saw departments from as far away as Minden, Grant and Imperial.

Crews evacuated

Crown and Ballmer, along with others, fought the fire all night north of the Niobrara River and the next morning were forced to evacuate to the south side when the blaze jumped the fire line.

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Both noted that townspeople and others were generous with food and water for the fire fighters, sending coolers of both before trucks headed for smoky canyons.

On their drive to Ainsworth, the fire fighters learned of another fire east of Dunning.

“It was right off the highway so we helped fight it for a couple of hours until it was knocked down,” Crown said.

Baler starts fire

The blaze, started by a baler, blackened about 640 acres, Ballmer said, noting that about 10 fire departments from the surrounding area responded to the call for assistance.

During the 28 years Ballmer has been with the Gothenburg Fire Department, he said he’s never gone as far as Ainsworth to fight a fire.

“We went to Stapleton earlier this year and 30 years ago, they went to Halsey,” he said.

Ballmer said he volunteered to make the trip because “everybody needs to take their turn.”

Nearly 10 years ago, Crown said numerous fire departments showed up to help local volunteers fight a wildfire.

“I wanted to make sure we returned the favor,” he said.

Asked how local residents could help, Crown said:

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“Pray for rain.”