

Storms end dry spell in prairies

(AP)—Recent thunderstorms have brought welcomed moisture to the parched prairies of western and north-central Nebraska.

Some of those storms also brought lightning that turned thousands of acres of grassland into fast-moving infernos.

State Fire Marshal Mike Durst said a wet spring had led to increased undergrowth on the Nebraska plains. And during the hot, dry summer, that extra growth became parched and hazardous.

"We have more to burn than in a normal year," Durst said from his Lincoln office.

The Nebraska Weather Service reported its grassland fire danger index remained in the very high category across much of north-central Nebraska on Wednesday. The hot, dry conditions should end with the arrival of a second cold front expected to begin pushing its way across the state early Thursday.

But in many areas, the damage has already been done.

The most recent range fire occurred Tuesday morning when a fire caused by lightning swept across about 3,000 acres north of Hershey and North Platte.

Hershey Fire Chief Mark Tobiasson said the grass fire apparently began between 10 a.m. and 11 a.m. in dry, deserted grazing land about 12 miles north and two miles east of Hershey.

About 50 firefighters from Hershey and surrounding communities joined ranchers in battling the blaze, Tobiasson said.

"The winds kept changing on us," he said. "You'd think you were catching it one way, and then it'd take off in a different direction."

The fire burned an area about five miles wide and 12 miles long before another thunderstorm brought brief, heavy rains that helped control the fire, he said.

It was the second substantial range fire caused by lightning in the region in less than a week. Another fire burned several thousand acres along the south shores of Lake McConaughy about 55 miles west of North Platte on Thursday.

Some saturating rains would ease the problem. A storm system that swept across the state Tuesday night did provide some relief. O'Neill received the highest recorded rainfall of 1.45 inches in the 24-hour period ending at 7 a.m. CDT Wednesday, the weather service reported.

The cold front should leave Thursday's highs in the mid-60s in the north to around 70 in the south. The cool weather and chance for rain remains in the forecast throughout the weekend.

Officer's family sets up memorial fund

OMAHA (AP)—A memorial fund for police safety is being established by the family of slain Police Officer James Wilson Jr.

The James B. Wilson "He Touched Us Last" Memorial Foundation will use the money raised for safety projects that are yet to be determined, said attorney Lawrence Batt, who is counsel for the family.

Possibilities discussed at a Wednesday news conference included video cameras for police

cars and money for bullet-proof vests.

Wilson was shot in the head and killed Aug. 20 after stopping a van he suspected was stolen. Seven people have been charged in the shooting.

Tax-deductible contributions to the fund can be donated through the Omaha Police Federal Credit Union.

Wilson's parents, James Wilson Sr. and Barbara, were named as the initial directors of the fund.

Hank's spirited performance impressed real-life astronaut

OMAHA (AP)—Former astronaut Jim Lovell was hoping Kevin Costner would play him in the movie "Apollo 13."

But Tom Hanks turned out to be a stellar alternative.

Lovell was on the ill-fated 1970 space flight to the moon and has written a book about it titled "Lost Moon." He spoke at the University of Nebraska at Omaha on Wednesday about the adventure, as well as "Apollo 13."

Lovell said Ron Howard, the director of "Apollo 13," had asked him who should play him in the movie.

Lovell said he suggested that Costner would be good for the part, but the actor was tied up with his "Waterworld" production and the role went to Hanks.

As it turned out, the two ended up having something in common. When they were children, both had built model rockets and dreamed of space flight, Lovell said.

"Tom Hanks is a closet astronaut," Lovell said. "You could not ask for a better leading man."

"He was enthusiastic and eager to learn."

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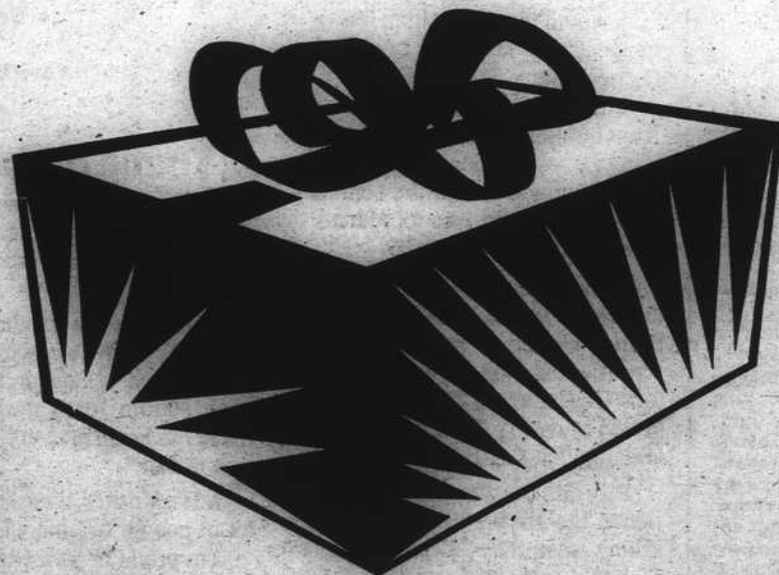
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