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**Capitol View
Commentary by J.L. Schmidt**

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**Incident Management Team Can Be A Life-Saver**

The left coast is on fire and the right coast and parts of the South are being whipped by tropical storms.
 Fire danger in Nebraska is high as well with more drought-ridden acres burned so far than in some years.
 But, thanks to cooperative and collaborative efforts, the Cornhusker State is handling matters better than ever.

The Nebraska Forest Service says about 25,000 acres have burned and that’s on the high side of average. Two big fires were sparked in one of the driest Augusts ever. The Hubbard Gap fire burned 4,000 acres in the Wildcat Hills of Banner County and the Aristocrat Fire burned 400 acres south of Chadron on state forestland.

The good news, it could have been much worse had it not been for teamwork between local and state agencies. Volunteer fire department chiefs in both incidents said they learned --from the fires that burned more than 500,000 acres in 2012 -- to call for help early on. Still, six volunteer firefighters were injured in the Hubbard Gap fire, which also prompted two emergency evacuations.

In response to the 2012 fires, the 2013 Nebraska Legislature allocated extra funds for more equipment and training. Now, the administration of Governor Pete Ricketts has taken one more all-important step and created a fully operational Type 3 All-Hazards Incident Management Team.

No, it’s not just another committee. It’s not a bunch of people running around with clipboards and file folders and attending meetings. This IMT is the real deal, considering the involvement of the Nebraska Emergency Management Agency, the State Fire Marshal’s office, the Nebraska National Guard and the Nebraska Forest Service.

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 Ricketts said the new Incident Management Team is helping better coordinate Nebraskans to provide leadership during extended emergencies including wildfires, floods, and other disasters. It will be most useful when communities face challenges beyond the capabilities of local responders.

Hopefully the IMT will eliminate the red tape and the hesitancy to call for help that has plagued the system in the past. It is supposed to work at the scene of a disaster to coordinate a response along with the State Emergency Operations Center at NEMA and federal partners, if needed, to secure resources and personnel that exceed a local jurisdiction’s capabilities.

It’s touted as a commitment to build strong partnerships. Local jurisdictions, often stretched to the limits in finances and time management, can now request that the State directly manage the disaster response. The team will be responsible for coordinating efforts in the wake of wildfires, floods and other disasters. A bonus is that the team can engage individuals with specialized training for a quicker response.

Officials with the Nebraska National Forests & Grasslands are urging visitors to help prevent wildfires because fire danger is rated as very high. The agency has reported a total of 11 fires this year, four caused by humans, and seven by lightning. Visitors should be aware of fire restrictions and know that target shooting and use of power equipment can spark a wildfire. Campfires should be kept small, fully extinguished and never left unattended. Fireworks and exploding targets are not allowed on national forest system lands.

State Fire Marshal Chris Cantrell calls the IMT “a major milestone towards Nebraska being capable of assisting its citizens in their greatest time of need.”

I’d say that’s great news, perhaps the best so far from this unusual year.

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*J.L. Schmidt has been covering Nebraska government and politics since 1979. He has been a registered Independent for 20 years.*