

Testimony to the
House Government and Veteran's Affairs Committee
January 22, 2021
Regarding House Bill 1146

Mr. Chairman and committee members, I am Lynn Brackel, chairman of the Bowman County Commission, and a member of the ND County Commissioners Association Legislative Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of funding for the radio equipment necessary to communicate on the new SIRN network.

I am testifying today to speak about the communication needs of emergency services in counties like Bowman and the 12 other counties that border South Dakota and Montana and therefore have increased needs for radio communications.

We certainly support the intent of HB 1146—to restore the original anticipated cost-share on radios for the many volunteer ambulance and fire responders, as well as public works and emergency managers. However, we believe that the authorized state cost-share structure is insufficient—particularly in counties like Bowman.

Our responders MUST have dual-band radios as we regularly must communicate and coordinate with responders from South Dakota and Montana. This was obvious very recently with a wildfire in Adams County and South Dakota with 40 mph winds. There were 13 Fire Departments from South Dakota and 10 Fire Departments from North Dakota. Bowman had 3 fire trucks and 8 men working the fire. (See Attachment of the Lemmon Fire Dept. press release)

Below is a history of past shared incidents with adjoining states:

- National Grasslands fire 2015 south of Hettinger in SD. National Forest Service set a control burn and lost control and burned 12,000 acres of grasslands. Responders: Hettinger, Reeder and SD Lemmon, Bison and Lodgepole.
- Bucyrus grass fire 2012 on the border of SD. Burned 3 houses and 3-4,000 acres of grass and cropland. Total amount of damages is \$3 million.
- Deep Creek Fire 2004 west of Amidon in the badlands burned 10,000 acres.
- Long Pines National Forest fire which occurred west of Camp Crook, SD and Mill Iron, Montana.

This cross-border coordination is not a rare occurrence, but a day-to-day and week-to-week reality. I am talking about this because the current and proposed state reimbursement is limited to \$1,500. An adequate dual-band radio, which ALL responders will need, has a price of \$5,000 or more. With the state \$1,500 subtracted from the \$5,000 leaves the two counties a cost of \$3,500.

Within Bowman and Slope Counties, we estimate that our responders collectively operate 400 mobile and handheld radios. At \$3,500/radio this calculates to \$1.4 million in tax dollars, which is simply unaffordable for the two counties, our small cities, and particularly the rural fire and EMS districts.

The two counties (Bowman and Slope) share 8 communication towers to get the needed coverage of the radios. Motorola is guaranteeing an 85% handheld and 95% mobile coverage to each region in the state. The two counties and the Association is requesting at least a 90% coverage guarantee in all counties before such a system can be fully implemented. This 90% coverage is necessary for the entire western part of the state because of the terrain in western North Dakota.

Mr. Chairman and committee members, to be clear, I support expanding the state cost-share to all necessary responding agencies, because of the history, coverage and cost of dual band radios. I am asking for your consideration of an increase to the allowable reimbursement in order to maintain a safe environment of the residents of southwest North Dakota and the adjoining states.



P.O. Box 599
Lemmon, SD 57638
Routine Business: 605-374-5796
FIRE: 911

Fire Chief: Chad Baumgarten
Asst. Fire Chief: Brent Dirk
Secretary/Treas.: Matthew Barnes
Fire Marshal: Shane Penfield
Training Officer: Neal Pinnow

****PRESS RELEASE****

Contact Information

Shane Penfield, Fire Marshal/Public Information Officer: 605-920-3003

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Incident Location

Ten Miles Northwest of Lemmon, South Dakota
Adams County, North Dakota

Incident Date and Time

January 14, 2021
4:33 pm

Incident Name: Windy Fire

Time of Release: 3:39 am

Responding Fire Departments:

South Dakota: Lemmon, Bison, McIntosh, Grand River, Morristown, Lodgepole, Meadow, McLaughlin, Isabel, Mobridge, Faith, Prairie City, Ludlow

North Dakota: Hettinger, Bowman, Flasher, Carson, Elgin, New Leipzig, Mott, Regent, Reeder, Scranton

Incident

On January 14, 2021 at 4:33 pm, the Lemmon Fire Department responded to a report of a major grass fire northwest of Lemmon in Adams County, North Dakota. At the time of the call winds at the Lemmon Municipal Airport were in excess of 30 to 40 miles per hour, sustained winds, with a high gust of 56 recorded on Thursday. Lemmon Fire immediately requested mutual aid from Hettinger, North Dakota and an initial attack was made. Upon arrival, a very pronounced smoke column was witnessed by fire personnel. The head of the fire had fire lengths upwards of 20 to 30 feet and contained extreme heated gas and smoke. The fire was moving rapidly to the southeast. An ominous orange glow in the west was seen from the City of Lemmon during the early hours of the fire. Several farms and ranches were evacuated and structure protection initiated by the responding fire departments. Nearly twenty area fire departments responded from as far away as Mobridge, South Dakota 100 miles to the east, Bowman, North Dakota 65 miles to the west and Faith, South Dakota 70 miles south and Flasher, North Dakota 80 miles to the northeast. In

addition to fire departments, several other agencies assisted including the Perkins County Sheriff's Office, Lemmon Ambulance, South Dakota Highway Patrol, Ziebach County Sheriff's Office, BIA Fire, Perkins County Highway Department, North Dakota Forestry and several individuals hauling water and plowing fire brakes. At the time of the fire the Lemmon area had been experiencing extremely dry conditions with no snow and under a High Wind Warning issued from the National Weather Service in Rapid City.

The Lemmon Fire Department responded with nine fire apparatus and nearly forty personnel. At the time of this release the extent of mutual aid is only known as "massive" and more specifics will be provided at a later time. Staging areas were designated at Lemmon and Shadehill where water resources from the several departments were organized.

At the time of this release a precise acreage has not been established but the fire traveled over twenty miles and was at some points over four miles wide. The fire's southerly progression was stopped at the Grand River at 11:04 pm, twelve miles south of Lemmon Thursday evening. At 1:38 am, while winds continued gusting at 47 miles per hour and humidity at 68% the west flank of the fire reignited, and crews continue to work at the time of this release to contain the fire.

The fire rapidly progressed through approximately 19 occupied farms and ranches and burned over an estimated unconfirmed 10,000 acres. At the time of this release no occupied residential structures were lost. Unfortunately a ranch headquarters experienced extensive damage. During the incident the Perkins County Sheriff's Office closed both U.S. Highway 12 west of Lemmon South Dakota and Highway 73 south, as crews battled the blaze.

Two injuries were reported and both firefighters received medical attention at the West River Regional Medical Center.

At the time of this release crews continue to monitor and extinguish the multi-mile long fire scene and expect to be on the scene until winds subside and the fire is completely extinguished sometime Friday.
