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North-Central Texas firefighters come to the rescue as wildfires ravage the state

JACKSBORO, Texas — The Colony Fire Chief Scott Thompson could see an amber glow in the sky as he neared the emergency staging area in Decatur.

At work Thursday, Thompson hadn't yet seen the news reports detailing the massive wildfires that were ravaging the state.

So it wasn't until he and his 10-person Denton County task force began receiving reports while en route to help that he realized the magnitude of the fires they soon would be facing.

"I'll tell you, Thursday night it was amazing, there was literally fire everywhere," Thompson said Friday afternoon, as he made his way back to Jacksboro where he and his team would rest after spending 20 hours in the field protecting one home after another. "The winds were extremely high and it was very difficult to figure out where to start."

Nearly two dozen wildfires raced across the state on Thursday and Friday, burning more than 100,000 acres — including two entire towns in Montague County — and killing at least three people. By Saturday, more than 150,000 acres had been burned.

The deadly fires overwhelmed local volunteer departments and exhausted Texas Forest Service resources, prompting the state agency to call for help via the Texas Intrastate Fire Mutual Aid System, or TIFMAS, agreement.

Through the state agreement, Texas Forest Service was able to pull in an additional 45 brush trucks, 24 engines, 11 command vehicles and 10 water tenders and people to staff them. The resources were pulled from 40 different fire departments in North-Central Texas, according to Joe Florentino, Little Elm fire chief and TIFMAS state coordinator.

"I have some firefighters out there, they've probably seen more fire in the last 24 hours than they've seen in the last couple years," Florentino said Friday. "It's quite hectic and it's still actively going on. There's so many at once, it's incredible."

TIFMAS was activated by the state on Friday, said David Abernathy, assistant chief regional fire coordinator for Texas Forest Service. Florentino immediately began polling areas resources to see what was available.

Within just four hours, crews from North Central Texas were arriving in Decatur. The teams then were immediately dispatched to fires across the state, Abernathy said.

One of the first TIFMAS teams to arrive was dispatched to a large fire just south of Montague and Saint Jo, both in Montague County. Heavy tankers were flying overhead dropping fire retardant while firefighters used both state and privately-owned bull dozers to battle the blaze from the

ground.

Holding back the head of the fire was critical, Abernathy said, and firefighters were working diligently at it. But they needed help.

"That's about the time the first TIFMAS task force showed up. Our people on the ground said it was about perfect timing getting there when they did," Abernathy said, praising the response provided as a result of the state agreement.

"If they had lost it there, most likely the fire would have burned into Cook County and burned down into Saint Jo. They worked all afternoon and all night and didn't get off the line 'til the morning."

Florentino said TIFMAS sent eight task force teams on Friday and three more on Saturday. A third wave of teams was ready to be deployed, should Texas Forest Service need them, he said.

TIFMAS doesn't require departments to send resources. It is a voluntary process. But Chief Thompson said he didn't hesitate when asked to respond.

Thompson said he and his counterparts understand that smaller, rural departments simply don't have the resources and funding to fight the raging wildfires alone. And, he said, he knew those volunteers would come to his aid if he ever needed it.

"What's really cool about this is the fact that all these different departments come together and work as one," Thompson said, explaining how he and a chief officer from Red Oak teamed up and quickly had a good, working relationship. "There are no egos involved. Nobody is saying I've got to be in charge. We're all here for one purpose."

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