

South Dakota National Guard

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Soldiers, Airmen reflect on SD Guard support to Schroeder Fire

RAPID CITY, S.D. – Several dozen South Dakota National Guard soldiers and airmen provided support to local, state and federal agencies to help fight the Schroeder Fire near Rapid City, March 29 – April 3.

The SDNG responded with HH-60 Black Hawk helicopters, a firefighting ground crew, and other support personnel to help battle the fire, which burned 2,224 acres and reached 100 percent containment on April 5.

The fire started the morning of March 29 four miles west of Rapid City off Schroeder Road and near Nemo Road. Fueled by extremely dry conditions and high winds, the fire moved quickly to the western edge of Rapid City, forcing the evacuation of residents in a number of neighborhoods.

Gov. Kristi Noem activated the National Guard to provide assistance to civilian authorities working to contain the fire. The SDNG's Joint Operations Center began calling in personnel for state active duty and coordinating equipment from a number of Rapid City and Black Hills area units.

“The Schroeder Fire is another example of the South Dakota National Guard answering the call to support our state in an emergency. In a short amount of time, we had people and resources available to the incident commander,” said Lt. Col. Dale Gadbois, SDNG director of military support to civil authorities.

Two helicopter crews from Company C, 1-189th Aviation Regiment were ready and on standby, waiting for the sustained 50 mph winds and 75 mph gusts to subside. With wind conditions safe enough to fly, the aviation crews began providing aerial water suppression support by mid-afternoon, dropping 370-gallon buckets of water on the fire.

“Our mission was to support ground crews who were creating hand and dozer lines, as well as knocking down smoldering areas that could create more problems and affect neighboring houses,” said Sgt. Trent Eddy, a crew chief with Co. C, 1-189th. “We made many bucket drops in hopes to slow the rapidly increasing fire. Many of the drops were within 100 yards of homes and some as close as 20 feet.”

“Our pilots are exceptional! Communicating is essential to line the aircraft up on a desired fire line and for us in the back seat to press the release button at the right moment, to drop the water exactly where the firefighters and ground crews needed it,” said Sgt. Sean Knutson, crew chief, Co. C, 1-189th.

Several members of the SDNG's 216th and 451st Firefighting Detachments were also called in to assist with efforts on the ground.

“We had soldiers coming in...with no hesitation. They just told their boss ‘I’m leaving now, I have to go,’ said Staff Sgt. Jason Besmer, readiness NCO, 216th/451st. “It was the employers being supportive of that, and it was good that we have soldiers that were willing to drop everything they had going on in their personal lives to respond to the fire and to do what we’ve been training for.”

The SDNG also began prepositioning heavy engineering equipment and bull dozer operators from the 842nd Engineer Company. A number of other support personnel also were called in to help provide

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logistics coordination, administrative support, and security at road checkpoints near West Camp Rapid, which was also sustaining fire damage.

For the next several days, the SDNG crews worked from the air and ground to help support about 250 other civilian firefighters and support personnel.

“We basically improved the firing line – we went through and did a lot of mop up type of operations,” said Besmer. “We wet down a lot of stuff that was still on fire and decreased the chances of that fire jumping the road and taking out structures. We also did some water tender operations where we filled other trucks that were working within the same division.”

From the air, the aviation crews flew over 21 hours, made 130 water drops, and dropped more than 48,000 gallons of water to assist firefighters on the ground. The soldiers also stressed the importance of training and the coordination needed to effectively and safely support these real-world missions.

“Training is paramount. There is no way that we could perform at the level we do without communication to and from all authorities and entities and the cross-organizational training we do,” said Knutson.

“A lot of crew coordination within the aircraft goes into fire support. From initially deploying our bucket, to coming in and out of the dip site, and most importantly getting a good drop line to be as effective as possible for the crews on the ground,” said Eddy. “Unfortunately, we seem to get a lot of repetitions here in the Black Hills every year with the constant high fire danger, but it keeps us prepared and ready to support the community at any instant.”

“Training is essential in our line of work. What you know and what you don’t know is the difference between life and death,” said Besmer. “It’s having that overall awareness of what’s going on around you at all times. We were in it and we could have easily had trees fall on people, which almost happened. You have to make sure you look up and look around.”

While the firefighters on the ground were often unseen, the helicopters flying in the air became a common fixture over Rapid City, as crews drew water from nearby water sources like Canyon Lake. For Eddy seeing the fire from above, the sight hit close to home.

“It felt great to be part of the effort of saving people’s homes. Being in a small community such as Rapid City, we all probably knew someone that was being evacuated,” said Eddy. “I grew up on the west side of town and personally knew multiple families that were affected. It definitely hits home knowing that I was a small part of the great effort that allowed for these people to have homes to go back to.

In addition to fighting the fire, the SDNG also provided additional support to the incident command team coordinating the fire response. After a few days, the ICP was relocated to Camp Rapid, which provided a building and space for daily operations, lodging for personnel, and staging for equipment and supplies.

By April 3, and with the fire nearing 100 percent containment, most National Guard members transitioned off state active duty. The soldiers were left feeling proud to be called up to help support their community.

“It’s a great feeling to have been a small part of the operation,” said Eddy. “Many people have expressed their gratitude for what all the firefighters and supporting personnel did to save our community. It is tragic moments like this that truly make people come together. Being a member of the National Guard and having the ability to help people of this great community makes it all worth it.

“It is always rewarding to support any mission...but being able to see first-hand the fire lines burning right up to the edge of houses and be stopped, and knowing that I or we played a part in that, really reinforces the decision to be a part of the National Guard,” said Knutson.

“It was a busy week for fire crews in western South Dakota and for the National Guard to fulfill its commitment to its state mission and assist local authorities during this incident, it really shows our level of preparedness and dedication,” said Gadbois. “Even though there were properties lost in this fire, many were saved and no lives were lost. The National Guard always takes pride in any supportive role to local and state agencies.”

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210330-Z-FO830-1224: A South Dakota National Guard HH-60 Black Hawk helicopter dips a water bucket into Canyon Lake to help fight Schroeder’s Fire in Rapid City, S.D., March 30, 2021. Several dozen South Dakota National Guard members provided support to local, state and federal agencies to help extinguish the Schroeder Fire. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Spc. Tyler O’Connell)



210330-Z-FO830-1115: A South Dakota Army National Guard HH-60 Black Hawk helicopter drops water from its bucket to help fight Schroeder’s Fire in Rapid City, S.D., March 30, 2021. The fire started in the morning on March 29 in the Black Hills four miles west of Rapid City off Schroeder Road and near Nemo Road. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Spc. Tyler O’Connell)



210330-Z-FO830-1023: South Dakota National Guard firefighters break up the ground to help alleviate hot spots from Schroeder’s Fire in Rapid City, S.D., March 30, 2021. Several members assigned to the 216th and 451st Firefighting Detachments were called in to help support containment efforts on the ground. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Spc. Tyler O’Connell)



210330-Z-FO830-1008: Firefighters from the South Dakota National Guard respond to Schroeder’s Fire in Rapid City, S.D., March 30, 2021. With the fire quickly spreading, additional SDNG resources were being called in to help support local, state and federal agencies. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Spc. Tyler O’Connell)



210330-Z-FO830-1259: A South Dakota National Guard HH-60 Black Hawk helicopter dips its water bucket into Canyon Lake to help fight Schroeder’s Fire in Rapid City, S.D., March 30, 2021. Gov. Kristi Noem activated the National Guard to provide assistance to local authorities working to contain the fire. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Spc. Tyler O’Connell)

FOR MORE INFORMATION, please contact the SDNG Public Affairs Office at (605) 737-6721 or e-mail ng.sd.sdarng.list.pao@mail.mil