



**ELLY GRIMM**

• **Leader & Times**

With warmer weather upon the area and the threat for wildfires being high in the area, it is always good to have as many resources as possible to help in the event of a disaster.

Recently, the Liberal Fire Department had an memorandum of agreement with Kansas Forestry Services approved by the Liberal City Commission at the commission's most recent meeting Tuesday evening. And as Liberal Fire Chief Kelly Kirk tells it, he is excited about the

partnership.

“I’ve been aware of it for a long time and like I said in the commission meeting Tuesday, we started discussions after all the wildfires that have happened the past couple years here in Kansas,” Kirk said. “There’s been a lot more discussion between local fire departments, the state level, and even the federal level. We’ve always been aware of the Kansas Forestry Services and the Volunteer Fire Assistance Program, but we always believed we weren’t qualified for it since it’s aimed at rural communities with a population of less than 10,000.”

Through a phone call with Ross Howe with the Kansas Forestry Services, however, it turned out Liberal did qualify.

“Even though we have a population of more than 10,000 ... out in our community, the CRP fields or even farm fields are right up at the city limits, so we’ve got the wild land/urban interface and we have the responsibility of protection on that,” Kirk said. “Then here in Liberal we have a 3-mile extra territorial where we use discretion that as the Liberal Fire Department, if we feel like we can be of benefit to the Seward County Fire Department, we might respond automatically to that area just to put trained people on the scene. We’ve talked about it and Ross agreed we would be able to participate in some of their programs because of those responsibilities. So the first step in that door is getting a memorandum of agreement with them – I can’t say we’ve never had one with them, but we haven’t had one for a very long time.”

There will be many benefits of the agreement, Kirk said.

“One, it’s another resource of technical assistance – being a municipal department, we mainly focus on structural firefighting and of course our responsibility to the airport like this training we’re in, we have aircraft firefighting and rescue responsibilities, hazmat, technical response,” Kirk said. “We have a lot of responsibilities, but we’re not experts in wildfire firefighting with trees and brush, things like that, so this will allow us to, if someone calls and asks what to do to make their property safer, we can contact Kansas State Forestry and get some advice and assistance about what to tell them. Then beyond that, it will open doors to different trainings whether it’s online or through handouts or in-person trainings at certain locations. We’re always looking for grants to acquire equipment and vehicles and things like that. We’ll be welcome to fill out that grant application annually. They don’t have unlimited funds but they do have access to a lot of surplus equipment and it fits those wild land firefighting needs, so we can apply for those grants and they’ll help us with the financial assistance we need to get that equipment.”

Overall, Kirk said, there will be benefits from this agreement to all sides.

“It helps us and it helps them because out here in rural Kansas, now they have an agreement with the Liberal Fire Department so if there’s a regional disaster or large wildfire disaster, if they need assistance, we have that familiarity with them and have that agreement in place to where we’re in a better position to help them as much as possible without depleting our resources here in Liberal,” Kirk said. “I like to say this agreement is just another tool in our toolbox. When we identify something we need, we try and look for different ways to acquire it and this is another avenue for us to go down to get the things we need and lessen the impact on the taxpayers.”

And with all the benefits that will come from the agreement, Kirk said he is looking forward to it going into effect, which should be soon.

“My biggest thing would be that someday, I hope to acquire one of their wild land firefighting vehicles. A truck with 4-wheel drive that holds about 1,000 gallons of water and has the ability to fight fire on the move,” Kirk said. “Because we’re a municipal department, our design to get to a fire is laying down a hydrant line from a water supply and that’s how we get our water. In a rural firefighting setting, there’s the challenge of getting water to that area and setting up your own water supply and then deploying it out to the fire. So right now, as the Liberal Fire Department, we don’t have a tremendous amount of open grassy areas. Over the years, we’ve maintained an apparatus that holds about 200 gallons of water and it’s able to pump and roll, but that’s really our only vehicle that’s able to do that. Our structural trucks, to fight a grass fire, have to set up and deploy a hose, and then fight as much fire as we can and then relocate and do that all over again. I would like to see us someday acquire a medium-sized firefighting apparatus with pump and roll capabilities because that would help us not only protect the city but also, when our rural fire department and Seward County or one of the neighboring fire departments need assistance, we’ll be able to help them better than we can today. It’s one of those things that in reaction to wildfires in the past, the discussions have ramped up and we’re all more cognizant of it and everyone’s talking to each other.”