Winds contribute to difficulty in getting blaze under control

By Jan Schultz
The Imperial Republican

Many of the younger firefighters on the Imperial Volunteer Fire Department hadn't seen a fire as big as the one Tuesday that burned hundreds of acres west of Imperial.

The fire, reported about 12:30 p.m., also had the attention of most in Imperial that day as the heavy cloud of smoke filled the western skies for several hours.

High winds peaking at 44 mph made it difficult to get under control, said First Asst. Chief Dan Robinson.

"We were behind the 8-ball from the get go," Robinson said.

"It was way too big for our trucks."

He estimated it wasn't under control until about 3:30 p.m., and eventually burned between 600 and 700 acres. The acreage affected was still a guess Wednesday morning.

Seven other area fire departments joined Imperial on the mutual aid effort, bringing 31 fire units to the scene.

Robinson said they called in Lamar right away before leaving the fire barn, then summoned the others after 10 to 15 minutes on the scene.

The fire started on ground owned by Dorothy Weiss about three-fourths of a mile north of Highway 6 on 327 Road.

IVFD officers indicate it appears the point of the fire's origin was near a pivot system, where there had been some pivot work being done.

The strong northwest winds moved the fire quickly, making it difficult to get a handle on as it burned through corn stalks, wheat stubble and pasture ground.

Robinson said they had hoped to stop it from jumping across the highway south, but they also had to watch the back end of it.

Flames, at times, were estimated to be up to 10 feet high in some spots.

The city of Imperial was never threatened, Robinson and fellow officers Chief Bryan Dannatt and First Lt. Brad Wheeler said.

Through the dispatcher, IVFD officers were in contact with the National Weather Service in North Platte, whose forecasters told them the wind wasn't expected to shift toward town.

The IVFD, with help from the other departments, did take precautions, however.

Fire trucks were stationed near Bernard and Margaret Marvin's windbreak north of their farmstead, at Vincent Marvin's place and near Greg and Tina Hayes' place.

On the advice of the firefighters, Margaret Marvin did leave their farmstead for a time as her husband was out trying to move a pivot from the fire's path.

The Marvins said the fire burned within 200 feet of their windbreak, and burned up an entire quarter of grass and wheat stubble, and charred parts of three other quarters, totaling about 250 acres.

In addition to the seven other fire departments, the fire officers said they had a lot of help from law enforcement, including city police, sheriff's department and the State Patrol. County emergency management also assisted.

Sections of Highway 6 west of Imperial and near the Colorado line were closed temporarily during the height of the fire.

A number of area farmers brought equipment to the scene, and several local businesses assisted by bringing water and equipment, as well.

Firefighters from Imperial were on the scene for five hours.

First Lt. Wheeler, whose been on the department more than 20 years, said Tuesday's was the biggest fire he's fought.

"Especially at this time of year," during the winter months, he said.

Fire Chief Dannatt was out Wednesday morning viewing the charred acres, and said the perimeter of the fire measured seven miles.

"It looks a lot bigger today (Wednesday) than it did yesterday," Dannatt said.