***By Jan Schultz***
***The Imperial Republican***

Homeowners in the northwest part of Imperial experienced some heightened concerns last Thursday as a grass fire burned dangerously close to their properties.

Winds that seemingly picked up all of a sudden mid-afternoon contributed to the fire's spread, eventually burning nearly 20 acres.

Imperial Fire Chief Bryan Dannatt said the wind was "gusting pretty good" that day, moving the fire quickly through dry grass toward the city's Sage Addition and Max Hoffmeister's home to the west of that addition.

Ron Hegwood of Imperial was mowing his property south of Mt. Hope Cemetery with a Ford tractor and mower, when he became stuck.

Winds came up quickly, according to the report, and a small fire started under the tractor, which had taken on a lot of weeds.

The fire burned into the dry CPR grass, pushed along by strong northwest winds, Dannatt said.

The Imperial Volunteer Fire Department (IVFD) was summoned shortly after 3 p.m., and the city pumper and four rural trucks were sent to the scene.

Dannatt said the rural trucks were immediately dispatched into the fields to attack the blaze, while the city pumper remained stationed on West 12th Street near a hydrant.

The city truck immediately wet down the area around the natural gas building nearby, and also served as a water refilling source for the rural trucks.

"That worked real well," Dannatt said of the refilling process.

When out of water, the rural trucks pulled up close to the city pumper to refill, as the city pumper took on water from the hydrant.

The fire stayed to the north of 12th Street, and did not jump south of it, Dannatt said, but property owners to the south weren't taking any chances.

As a precaution, several Sage Addition homeowners turned on their sprinkler systems outside.

Chase County Community Hospital was also ready to evacuate its six patients that day if needed, said Administrator Lola Jones.

She said Perkins County Hospital in Grant and their ambulance service were on standby to accept and transport patients if needed. The patient records were also ready to go, she said.

"We were a little worried about how close it was. Staff was watching it," Jones said.

She noted they also have a similar arrangement with Dundy County Hospital for the transfer of patients in emergencies.

The two back tires on Hegwood's tractor were burned up, Dannatt said, and one of the front tires was also damaged. About a dozen trees on his property were most likely lost, he added.

Dannatt said it's terribly dry in this area right now.

"It was a tough one to fight that day because the grass was so thick, too," he said.

Fire departments from Lamar and Wauneta were also called in to assist at last week's fire.

Dannatt said the Imperial trucks were on the scene over three hours. Lamar and Wauneta were sent back to their communities once the blaze was under control.

It was just two months ago when a Jan. 6 fire burned about 600 acres northwest of Imperial. Strong, northwest winds that day also caused a lot of concern among Imperial city and rural residents, but no homes were damaged.