Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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WASHINGTON – Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) Director W. Patrick Ragsdale today announced that the BIA Winnebago (Nebr.) Agency Fire and Fuels Management Group was honored March 7 at the Department of the Interior National Fire Center's 2006 National Fire Plan Awards ceremony held in Phoenix, Ariz. National Fire Plan awards are given annually in recognition of outstanding accomplishments related to the implementation of the Department's National Fire Plan (NFP). The Winnebago Agency Fire and Fuels Management Group received the 2006 Award for Excellence in Hazardous Fuels Reduction.

"I congratulate all the members of the Winnebago Agency Fire and Fuels Management Group on receiving this National Fire Plan award," Ragsdale said. "Their leadership, teamwork, partnership-building skills, innovation and commitment to excellence ensured that their hazardous fuel reduction and native grasslands enhancement project for the Santee Sioux Nation would be a success."

The Fire and Fuels Management Group was honored for its work on the ST-Bar Ranch Fuels Reduction/Range Rehabilitation Project, whose long-term goal is the restoration of the mid-grass prairie ecosystem on the Santee Sioux Indian Reservation in northeastern Nebraska. Starting in June 2001, the agency has worked closely with the Santee Sioux Nation to significantly reduce non-native floras which have flourished over the past 100 years on the tribe's 115,000-acre reservation at the expense of native prairie grasslands and are a source of fuel conducive to conflagration fires.

The Winnebago Agency, which was responsible for overall management and direction of the project, worked with the Santee Sioux tribal community and other affected tribes and BIA and state agencies in Nebraska and South Dakota. The assembled team included representatives from the Santee Sioux Nation, Omaha Tribe and Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska and the Yankton Sioux Tribe, Rosebud Sioux Tribe, Lower Brule Sioux Tribe, Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe and Crow Creek Sioux Tribe of South Dakota, as well as the BIA agencies serving those tribes, the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Bureau of Land Management and the Nebraska State-chartered Natural Resources Conservation District.

Led by the Fire and Fuels Management staff, the ST-Bar Ranch project team set out to accomplish the goal of enhancing the productivity of the Santee Sioux reservation's native rangeland for livestock and wildlife production through hazardous fuel reduction while restoring the balance to its mid-grass prairie ecosystem. The team was able to train and employ tribal members in the elimination of hazardous fuels and utilize local businesses to support fuel reduction crews thereby bringing economic benefits to the tribal communities involved.

The projected long-term outcomes for the project include increased wildland fire safety to the public and firefighters, reduced risk of unwanted fires to communities, infrastructure and resources, strengthened rural economic sustainability, increased public education about the importance of hazardous fuel reduction activities, improved resiliency and sustainability of wildland ecosystems, fewer lands severely degraded by wildland fires and reduced cost to the Federal government for wildfire suppression and rehabilitation.

Introduced in 2000, the Department of the Interior's National Fire Plan is a 10-year comprehensive strategy to suppress wildland fires and rehabilitate fire-damaged areas. The STBar Ranch Fuels Reduction/Range Rehabilitation Project employed three of the four primary goals of the Plan: Reduce hazardous fuel, restore fire-adapted ecosystems and promote community assistance for accomplishing these goals. For more information about the National Fire Plan, visit www.fireplan.gov.

Note to Editors: The photo of the Winnebago Agency Fire and Fuels Management Group receiving its 2006 NFP Excellence in Hazardous Fuels Reduction award that accompanies this release may be viewed at www.doi.gov.