Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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When the fire started on June 11 at the Over the Rainbow housing subdivision located on the Fort Apache Reservation in central-eastern Arizona, the initial response to it was performed by the Fort Apache Bureau of Indian Affairs Fire Department. But the fire grew quickly and in minutes was beyond the capacity of local resources. The Bureau of Indian Affairs coordinated the effort to get other resources from the state of Arizona and the U.S. Fish and Game Department to combat the fire that was quickly threatening surrounding property. The fire, which was started by an unknown person that police continue to seek for questioning, burned for five days. By the time the fire was under control it had burned over 4,470 acres of desert foothills and forested mountains, causing the shutdown of electrical service to the reservation for a couple of days.

No fatalities were reported, but 17 homes and 13 out buildings were destroyed. The fire caused anxious feelings when the blaze spread to within a few hundred feet of the local Indian Health Service Hospital. 100 homes had to be evacuated with patients and residents being housed at the local high school dormitories. Also 240 families were displaced from their smoke and heat damaged homes.

The Fort Apache Tribal Council passed a resolution declaring the site a disaster area, opening the door for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to assist in the recovery effort. FEMA is onsite, working with Bureau and Tribal officials to assess the damage, thought to be in the hundreds of thousands of dollars, in personal property losses. The American Red Cross and other non-governmental agencies are also helping to provide food, shelter and clothing for those who need it. The problem is that FEMA assistance covers only the cost of dealing with the immediate needs of the individuals, there are other costs associated with the fire that will not be covered. The tribe with meager means, will have to try and make up the difference.

At the peak of the fire, the flames shot over 400 feet into the air and there were close to 800 people assigned to fight the fire of which 366 were Bureau of Indian Affairs employees and crews. The Bureau also supplied air tankers, helicopters, bulldozers and other logistical and communications equipment at various stages of the incident. The Bureau of Indian Affairs continues to assist the Fort Apache Tribal Government in their its to help their tribal members with putting their lives back together.