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Janklow Directs State Agencies To Prepare For Black Hills Fires June 6, 2000

(Pierre) -- Gov. Bill Janklow said Tuesday he has directed state agencies to beef up their fire fighting equipment, training and planning to deal with the high probability of major forest fires in the Black Hills this summer.

Janklow met with leaders and staff from the state Division of Forestry, the Department of Agriculture, the Highway Patrol, the South Dakota National Guard, the Division of Emergency Management, the Department of Corrections and the state Fire Marshal's Office.

One of the first actions will be clearing fire trails clogged by millions of broken and downed trees damaged by the April 19 snowstorm. Janklow assigned Corrections officials to begin assembling and training teams of inmates to work on the project.

"It's a horrible mess," Janklow said. "What makes this more pressing is that the Black Hills National Forest is the most inhabited of any national forest in the United States."

Janklow approved the purchase of 300 more sets of fire-protection gear and hand equipment. That will be in addition to approximately 150 sets now held by the Division of Forestry, 120 owned by Corrections and 150 with the U.S. Forest Service. Additional communications equipment also will be ordered.

Other steps under way include advance permits and route selections for hauling bulldozers and other heavy equipment on highways to the forest areas, training additional personnel and coordinating plans between agencies. "Our objective is how to prevent fires from becoming major catastrophes," Janklow said.