



PO BOX 201706
Helena, MT 59620-1706
(406) 444-3064
FAX (406) 444-3036

State-Tribal Relations Committee
62nd Montana Legislature

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December 27, 2012

Mr. Mike Addy
Superintendent
Bureau of Indian Affairs
P.O. Box 40
Lame Deer, MT 59043

Dear Superintendent Addy:

The State-Tribal Relations Committee is the primary liaison between the Legislature of Montana and the sovereign tribal governments situated within the state. During the 15 months of the legislature's 2011-2012 interim, the STR committee maintained a strong interest in the performance of emergency responders in some hard hit areas of Indian country in Montana.

At Lame Deer in September 2011 our committee met with tribal and state representatives of Montana's Disaster and Emergency Services as well as the Federal Emergency Management Agency. At subsequent meetings it also heard testimony regarding the emergency response to floods in the Fall 2011 and fires in the Summer 2012.

While very much of what we heard reflected strong preparedness and professionalism by the array of responders involved, a grave situation did arise during the fires, notably the Ash Creek fire on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation in June 2012 that our committee wants to bring to the renewed attention of the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

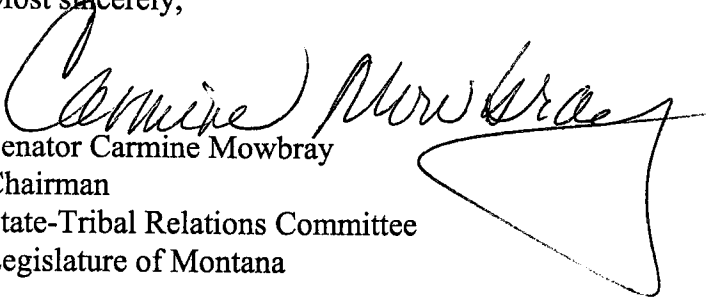
On June 26 the rapidly spreading fire brought down power poles—causing emergency repeaters to shut down and responders' radios to go silent. The Northern Cheyenne Reservation's radio site has no backup power system. As written testimony to the STR committee explained, the result was that, "The request for structure protection never happened and we found residents scrambling to get out of the area just a head of the fire." The reservation is without cell phone service and many residents do not have land line communication. Presenters before our committee referred multiple times to the "chaos" that ensued as more than 100,000 acres were scorched.

It is the STR Committee's understanding that the Northern Cheyenne tribal government has long had discussions with BIA officials about emergency telecommunications and has received assurances of support that have not materialized. The tribal first responders are, at a minimum, very much in need of a backup generator and propane tank (the specifications of which your

office might already be familiar) that they have said they would secure with fencing.

The testimony our committee received emphasized the feeling of good fortune that there were no fatalities resulting from the Ash Creek fire given that responders and residents alike had to make life-or-death decisions without the benefit of communications. With this letter, Mr. Addy, our committee strongly encourages you to bring this urgent issue to the attention of the appropriate BIA officials so that it might swiftly be resolved. Clearly, residents of the Northern Cheyenne Reservation might not be so "fortunate" with the next disaster.

Most sincerely,


Senator Carmine Mowbray
Chairman
State-Tribal Relations Committee
Legislature of Montana

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