



NORTHERN ROCKIES TEAM 3

INCIDENT COMMANDER: MIKE BEHRENS

# Big Knife, Niarada, & Mill Pocket Fires

Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes

Fire Information: 406-426-9595 | [2023.BigKnife@firenet.gov](mailto:2023.BigKnife@firenet.gov)



<https://tinyurl.com/BigKnifeFire>

<https://tinyurl.com/NiaradaMillPocketFires>

**August 13, 2023**

**Location:** Big Knife - 5 miles east of Arlee, MT | Niarada - 12 miles west of Elmo, MT | Mill Pocket: 3 miles West of Hwy. 28

**Start Date:** Big Knife - 7/24/2023 | Niarada - 7/30/2023 | Mill Pocket - 7/30/2023 **Cause:** Lightning **Structures Lost:** 4

**Big Knife**-4,952 acres, 7% contained | **Niarada**-20,365 acres, 70% contained | **Mill Pocket**- 2,135 acres, 89% contained

**Total Personnel:** 657 total **Engines:** 46 **Aircraft:** 1 + others available as needed **Hand Crews:** 10

## Big Knife Fire

As the weather gets hotter and drier, fire activity will increase again, especially at the lower to mid-elevations. Fire managers with the Incident Management Team, BIA, and CSKT are having extensive conversations about long-term planning for the Big Knife Fire. These discussions include balancing protecting homes, infrastructure, and cultural resources, with the risk to firefighters and the likelihood of success. Because of this, different tactics are being used on the fire's north, west, east and south sides.

Helicopters have been doing water drops to minimize the fire's spread into Gold Creek on the northern perimeter. Crews have completed a fuel break along the Jocko Canyon Road and line preparation and vegetation reduction along the Jocko S Canal Road. Equipment operators and crews finished control lines along the fire's southwestern edge to Agency Creek. Firefighters are monitoring the fire in these areas and are prepared to act if the fire moves down toward the lines.

On the south side, firefighters are working to keep the fire north of Agency Creek. Helicopters have dropped water to cool the edge, and sawyers have been cutting down hazard trees to allow safe access. Additional crews will be inserted in this area to finish hazard tree mitigation and evaluate opportunities for digging handline and going direct on the fire's edge.

To the east of the fire, crews finished installing sprinkler systems and pumps around several pieces of infrastructure and the Jocko Lookout. The lookout has been covered with a fire-resistant wrap. Fire managers are discussing the next steps for this area, balancing the benefits of fire on the landscape, the risk to firefighters and pilots, and the values threatened.

## Niarada & Mill Pocket Fires

Firefighters have worked hard to reach containment around a large portion of the fire perimeter the past two weeks. Near Highway 28, skilled sawyers have been cutting fire-killed snags (dead-standing trees), enabling safe access for hand crews to previously hazardous, inaccessible areas.

Along the southeastern and southwestern sides, crews continue to work directly along the fire's edge to eliminate heat and build firelines. Several Type 1 Interagency Hotshot Crews have been improving firelines and preparing for a strategic firing operation on the southwest side. This operation will be done during favorable conditions to secure portions of the indirect line where it's unsafe for firefighters to go direct. Fire managers planned to implement other firing operations, but those operations have been deemed unnecessary because the weather moderated fire behavior which allowed crews to go direct.



Structure protection crews continue to work outside Elmo toward Big Arm, testing sprinkler systems and pumps while working with landowners on additional vegetation management around structures.

Containment of the Mill Pocket Fire continues to increase. Much of the remaining perimeter is in mop-up and patrol status. However, heat remains in steep scree slopes on the northwestern side. Helicopters continue to drop water as needed, and crews are mopping up hot spots where they can access them.

### **WEATHER AND FIRE BEHAVIOR**

Today, temperatures will begin increasing as humidity levels drop. A very hot and dry pattern is expected to form starting Monday and extending through Wednesday. As vegetation dries out, the potential for more active fire behavior will increase.

### **CLOSURES AND SPECIAL MESSAGES**

Several areas near the base of the mountains west of the Big Knife Fire remain in PRE-EVACUATION status by order of the Lake County Sheriff. See the map for those locations in yellow (Jocko, Canal, Francis). In the Tribal Primitive Area, Belmore Slough and Burnt Cabin Roads are closed.

Near the Niarada Fire, the Lake County Sheriff's Office has a PRE-EVACUATION WARNING in place for the area that includes Alexander Road, Early Dawn Road, Spring Lane Road, Walking Horse Lane, Windward Heights Road, Wildhorse View, Buffalo Bridge Road, Saddle Drive, Island Butte Lane, Bridle Path, Ten Deuce Way, Cliffview Drive, and Ricketts Road. The remainder of the town of Elmo is in READY status.

A PRE-EVACUATION WARNING means you may be in your home. However, as there still is a risk from both fires, those in this status should not bring back evacuated livestock until the area is downgraded to READY status.

A temporary flight restriction (TFR) is in effect around both fire areas. Do not fly unmanned aircraft (drones) near the fire areas, as that is hazardous for pilots, and the firefighters on the ground who rely on aircraft support. Remember, if you fly, we can't!

### **FIRE RESTRICTIONS**

Stage 2 fire restrictions are in place across the Flathead Indian Reservation. No campfires are allowed, no smoking outside of vehicles, no operating combustible engines from 1 p.m. to 1 a.m., no operating vehicles off designated roads and trails. Residents and visitors are encouraged to visit [www.MTFireInfo.org](http://www.MTFireInfo.org) for more fire information across Montana.



A faller drops a hazard tree on the southwest side of the Big Knife Fire in Division Z. Photo Credit: Joe Zwierzchowski

