

Highway department fire damages hit \$1 million



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The Jackson County Highway Department shop and equipment suffered \$1 million in damages in a Christmas Eve snow plow fire, but the county will come out of the incident nearly unscathed.

The Dec. 24, 2012, fire that started in a plow truck left behind 10 damaged plows and extensive damage to the Black River Falls-based building, but the county only will pay \$15,000 to \$25,000 out-of-pocket in the fire's aftermath.

"It's absolutely great. That's why we keep paying our insurance premiums — so that when we have a situation like this, we've got it covered," Jackson County Highway Commissioner Randy Anderson said.

"I think we are coming out of this very, very good."

The Black River Falls Fire Department responded to the fire after a report of smoke coming from the Harrison Street building where 10 of the trucks used for county highway plowing are stored.

The fire coming from the ignited plow extended into the roof of the building, which suffered smoke and structural damage in addition to damage to its electrical service. The ignited plow is a total loss, and the nine other county highway trucks sustained smoke and soot damage.

The nine plows were left unusable while they were cleaned and repaired, but no snow fell while they were out of service. They are back in service now, and the only issue that remains is that they're being stored outdoors, Anderson said.

"Mother Nature cooperated fantastically with us. It went great (in the interim)," he said. "I appreciate the public's patience with us.

"I'm thankful Mother Nature cooperated so we didn't have any (traffic) incidents."

Crews from various businesses remain working to clean and restore the building, which also suffered smoke and soot damage in rooms adjacent to where the plows were stored.

The building damage is estimated at \$750,000, and work to sand blast and paint interior walls and other structures continues, along with replacing some windows and electrical wiring. The content damage — or that which includes the trucks and items stored inside the building — totals \$250,000.

The county likely will pay \$15,000 in insurance deductibles as a result of the fire, and it likely will incur up to another \$10,000 to replace aging lighting that was scheduled for an upgrade soon anyway, Anderson said.

The department will convert to more energy-efficient materials — a “silver lining” to the incident, he said.

“There will be some cost, but it’s a really good time because two-thirds of the (lighting in the) building — that needed replacement anyway,” Anderson said.

“This just happens to be part of the silver lining to this.”

Jackson County Highway Committee Chair Jeff Amo agreed.

“We’re coming out of it fairly well,” he said at Monday’s executive and finance committee meeting. “But it’s been ugly down there (at the shop).”

Anderson said he wants to thank the person that reported the fire and the firefighters who helped extinguish it. The process to get the department back running normally also been going fairly smoothly, with normal day-to-day life at the shop resuming in three to four weeks, he said.

“I don’t think I’ve ever taken the chance to thank the firemen and the person who called it in,” he said. “Everyone’s done a really good job of getting the people we need here to get the work done.”

“Everyone’s been working really well with us ... to let us know what’s happening and when we can expect to have the business as usual again.”