LAWTON, Okla. — The Wichita Mountain Wildlife Refuge has been tapped to assist Colorado with more than half a dozen wild land fires in the state. Despite the assistance of more than 2,000 local and federal firefighters, the blaze has continued to grow since June 10.

Jeremiah Phillips, Assistant Fire Manager Officer, said the refuge sent its first team of four, along with its 900 gallon heavy engine, on June 14 to begin assistance on the Little Sand Fire. While on location, Phillips said his crews will work on severity assignments – working in the areas where support is needed the most – which he said is “basically doing what out of town folks did for us last year (during the Medicine Park fire).”

Per protocol, Phillips said each crew there will work on-scene for 14 days before being relieved. The next group is set to travel up to Colorado on June 29 and will begin its two-week shift the following day.

As of 8 a.m. Monday, the fire, burning near Pagosa Springs, Durango and Vallecito, had burned approximately 21,616 acres and was 31 percent contained.

“The conditions up there right now are extreme, and that’s putting it lightly,’ the assistant fire manager said. “It’s very hot, and the last good burn they had (in Colorado) was 10 years ago. Because of that time lapse, the fuel the fire is burning on is very compact, causing the flames to spread at an increased rate of speed.”

When fighting a fire of this magnitude, relying on assistance from surrounding communities and states is critical to containing the blaze. Phillips said with budget cuts affecting nearly every department in the United States in recent years, one station rarely has the firefighters to battle the situation on its own.

“You need your neighbors to help you,” he said. “On a personal note, it’s great to be able to help your fellow man. On a professional level, any experience that gives you more knowledge when you come home is a good thing.”
Phillips said the Wichita Mountain Wildlife Refuge will continue to send assistance for as long as the weather and fire dangers here permit.

“As long as it’s green here, we want to keep our people out there (in Colorado),” Phillips said. “We wouldn’t expect people to come down here and help us if we didn’t do our part and go help them.”