

NINA MOINI: The wildfires in the Boundary Waters are officially fully contained after nearly two months. 100% containment doesn't mean all the fires are fully extinguished. There are likely some hotspots smoldering deep in the soil that won't be out until the first snowfall, but it's good news ahead of the fall tourism season for the region. This weekend, the city of Ely is celebrating fall with their 32nd annual Harvest Moon Festival. The festival will hopefully be a business boost as the region continues to recover from wildfires. Joining me back on the show is Ely mayor Heidi Omerza. Thanks very much for your time, Mayor.

HEIDI OMERZA: Thank you. I appreciate you having me, Nina.

NINA MOINI: How are you feeling about this news of 100% containment? I know it's been a long two months.

HEIDI OMERZA: It has been a long two months, and it just-- it feels really good. We all felt there was a time when this would never happen, or they kept talking about we wouldn't be out of here until the first snowfall. So it's a breath of fresh air. It's a new season. School has started. So it feels like a new season, as you said.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, a new step in recovery. And when we talked with you, I think it was end of July last, the Boundary Waters were just starting to partially reopen in some areas. Businesses in Ely were taking a hit. What has the last month or so been like for businesses? Has it started to pick up at all?

HEIDI OMERZA: It has started to pick up. I spoke with many visitors and other people around town just that they decided this was the time to come and just do a mini vacation to Ely, or a lot of other people that lived in Ely decided this was our time to just check different places out in Ely or-- so it was really nice. Ely, although sometimes we're known to be a little bit divisive, this was the time when the community, the area really came together and was Ely strong, and took to heart shopping local, making sure we supported everyone day in and day out 24/7.

And it was really heartwarming to see. And that community spirit is really continuing on right now. And it really makes me proud of living here, being here, and representing the-- representing Ely.

NINA MOINI: And in the short-term, we know the region isn't going to be receiving any aid in terms of funding from the state capital. This was after ultimately, Governor Tim Walz decided not to hold a special session to consider some funding in the shorter term. What are you turning to to help the region recover at this point financially?

HEIDI OMERZA: Well, right now, we have local programs that we have through our EDA. So we're just making use of the regular programs, if you will, that we have. And they're funded through the IRRR.

NINA MOINI: Can you remind me what the IRRR is?

HEIDI OMERZA: Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation.

NINA MOINI: OK.

HEIDI OMERZA: So a lot of us, we're just still waiting to see what the long-term effect is. Like, what really happened, and what do you need? And we're working with our economic developer to see what we can do to help into the future. What can we do if this happens again? So we're-- a big survey went out. We're finding out the results of the survey next week. And so lessons learned and how can we help. So we're still populating the numbers I guess is the better way to put it.

And then really talk with our legislators the next session to see, what can we do to help them? So we haven't given up on that, but we know it's going to be hard because we don't who's going to be in what position come the next legislative session. We're going to wait and see, I guess.

NINA MOINI: We know some of the businesses that were most hard hit from this were canoe outfitters, hotels, people that rely on summer really to keep their businesses afloat. We know there are still some parts of the Boundary Waters that are closed. Can you talk a little bit about how recovery looks in the fall season for these types of businesses?

HEIDI OMERZA: So it's been really nice because we've been-- I know our tourism board and our chamber has been really working with Explore Minnesota and really getting a lot of media blasts out about, this is a great time to come up to Ely and actually this whole area, which I believe I've said several times that I love this time of year because it's beautiful up here. And there's usually not as many people, but I have a feeling that might change this year. It's beautiful up here this time of year.

Harvest Moon is by far and away-- we have Harvest Moon this weekend. It is by far and away my favorite festival we have. Basically the entire month of September, October, it's just beautiful up here. The leaves are changing.

NINA MOINI: Yeah.

HEIDI OMERZA: And it's cooler. And you just-- you can't go wrong. We have gorgeous hiking trails, biking trails, and all of the above. So it's an easier time to get around. And students are in school. I'm a teacher, so I know they're here and--

NINA MOINI: Yeah. No, I mean, what a beautiful time of year. Fall in Minnesota and there's so much to be done. With the Harvest Moon Festival, though, happening this weekend, tell us a little bit more about it. Like, what kinds of vendors are there? What can people expect? Because you never who might even be listening who might decide to make a trip.

HEIDI OMERZA: Well, get in a car, hop on up. It's in our main park, but there's a lot of other things-- like our downtown does a lot of things as offshoots to help support it. There's a lot of vendors as you come along the way. So it's from 10:00 to 5:00 on Friday and Saturday, and then Sunday I think it's from 10:00 to 3:00. It closes early. So you can eat, you can drink, you can sample all sorts of foods. So all the-- there's vendors from crafts to jewelry to food to local organizations to support. You name it, we probably have it.

It's really low key. It's just a nice time to take a stroll in the park and just relax. And it's a really relaxed atmosphere for a park. There's just a lot of other things to do, and there's a lot of hikes and trails close by, and you can just make a day of it if you want.

NINA MOINI: Mayor, do you have a sense for how bookings are looking so far for this fall? If anybody is planning a trip, do you feel like people are really paying attention and intentionally booking for the fall, or what can you tell us?

HEIDI OMERZA: So a lot of our local hotels that our main hotels, but some of the more local ones, had firefighters in them. So now that they have left us, it's now backfilling into having regular-- having regular guests.

NINA MOINI: OK.

HEIDI OMERZA: I mean, that was the good and the bad of the forest fires I guess. We did-- and I think also, hopefully with the change, there are a lot more places to visit because a lot of people think of Ely in the Boundary Waters. But there are a lot of places to visit in Ely besides the Boundary Waters. And some of our guests found that out, some of our tours found that out.

NINA MOINI: All right, Mayor, thank you so much for your time. Really appreciate it, and wishing you a lot of fun this weekend for everybody at the Harvest Moon Festival. You all have surely deserve it.

HEIDI OMERZA: Well, thank you so much for having me on. I appreciate the opportunity.

NINA MOINI: Heidi Omerza is the mayor of Ely.