

They PERSEVERE

CAB's Rural Relief Fund adds hope.

by Morgan Marley Boecker, Certified Angus Beef LLC



It isn't easy being a cowman.

One minute the natural world is your best friend; the next it's your biggest competitor, dealing defeat in one play.

"You can't fight with Mother Nature," says Iowa farmer Ken Hartzell. "The best you can do is work with her."

Making a living from the land means living in trepidation. Bad days will eventually come, bringing no answer to that inevitable question, "Why us?"

Sunday, September 6, 2020: Cold Springs Fire in Washington

It was just a normal day.

Todd Vejraska was at home with his family, then he was running out the door toward the fire.

"That was the last time I was home for 24 hours," the Washington rancher recalls.

The Cold Springs Fire was headed straight for his cows with newborn calves. So Vejraska tried to get ahead to open gates and give his cattle any chance to escape and survive.

Fires aren't uncommon in the western United States, especially with an extended drought in many areas.

"I've been a firefighter, I've been on a hotshot crew, I've done other things," he says. "This wasn't

something you normally see. It was really bad.”

It blew across the land like a tornado, with enough ferocity to engulf an entire field in one pass. They fought to put out burning electrical poles, not knowing the fire was already miles ahead. The battle was lost before the fight ever began.

At 2:30 a.m., he tried texting his wife, Katlenia, that he was okay. When he looked up, the fire was running across the front of his pickup, and he drove like hell to escape. It was time to seek safety and wait it out.

Just south in Brewster, Wash., Dale Smith fought the same fire.

With the help of neighboring ranches and local communities, they brought nearly 600 cows home, but not unscathed. Hundreds more died in the fire or had to be put down.

All of the fences and 90% of his hay stocks were gone. The only thing they salvaged was part of the corrals and their home.

“I don’t want it to be a pity party,” Smith says. “This is what we want to do. This is what could happen to anybody else if ranching is what they really want to do.”

Vejraska only lost one calf, but the pasture loss will take years to grow back enough to graze.

“Everybody is going to have to learn to make do with less,” he says, noting fewer cows mean less income.

Building fence will take a lot of hard work, and land recovery will take time; but in five years, Smith sees better cows, better pasture management and better fences taking shape on his ranch and those around him.

“We’re just trying to survive,” Vejraska says. “That’s the hardest thing. You’re just trying to survive for the next two years until you get back on your feet.”

It’s an entire community hanging on to hope — forgotten strength surfaces after disaster strikes. It’s bull customers, friends and just good people coming together to give and build back, Smith says.

“We want to be in the cattle business, that’s all we’ve ever done,” he says. “We’re just trying to weather the storm.”

Monday, August 10, 2020: Derecho blows through Iowa

Thunderstorms are common in the Midwest, but this one was unique.

On August 10, a “derecho” tore its way across Iowa, causing mass destruction. It was a rare phenomenon that brought heavy rain and hurricane-force winds reaching 75 to 99 mph.

Lee Crock rode out the storm in his pickup at the bank in Mechanicsville watching trees and limbs fall across the parking lot until he got a call from his daughter saying, “You need to come home.”

It was less than an hour from the time the storm started until he pulled into his drive. Buildings were gone, roofs were missing and, for the first time in 50 years, the barnyard looked different.

“In 45 minutes, we lost a million dollars,” Crock says.

Machine sheds and barns were destroyed, equipment was damaged, trees had fallen on nearly every structure, and grain bins were blown away. The hog barn that had been paid off for less than a month was lifted off its foundation and missing part of its roof.

The physical property structures can be rebuilt, but the Crocks estimated it would be 14 months before they ever saw a paycheck.

Doug Schroeder and wife, Glenda, were on vacation when the storm hit.

“My son Drew called and told me how devastating it was, but he kept a calm demeanor,” Schroeder says. “As soon as we got home (to Clarence, Iowa), we started cutting tree limbs and cleaning things up. It’s just what you do.”

In town, people out to help were nearly as numerous as the fallen trees. Friends, neighbors and strangers worked together.

“We’re the type that don’t like to ask for help,” Schroeder says, especially when others have it worse. No one admits that it hurts to lose century-old barns; only their faces reflect the sentimental value lost.

Ken Hartzell, Moscow, Iowa, was putting away a halter when one gust of wind peeled off the roof above him like a bandage.

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He waited a few minutes, thinking surely a wind this strong and fast would move out quickly. When it didn't subside Hartzell ran to the house, pelted by gravel, pebbles and sand moving 80 mph across the drive.

That week, high school football teams canceled practice to help senior citizens pick up their yards, while firemen hauled water to livestock.

"I am one of the lucky ones," he says.

The damage was manageable and everyone was safe. No cattle were hurt.

"Someone said farming isn't for the faint of heart," Hartzell adds. "Well they're right because you never know what Mother Nature's gonna throw at you."

As they assessed the losses and cleared debris, Crock's perspective shifted to the future.

"When you can kind of start over," he says, "how do you plan for the next generation, and what do they want to do?"

A way to help

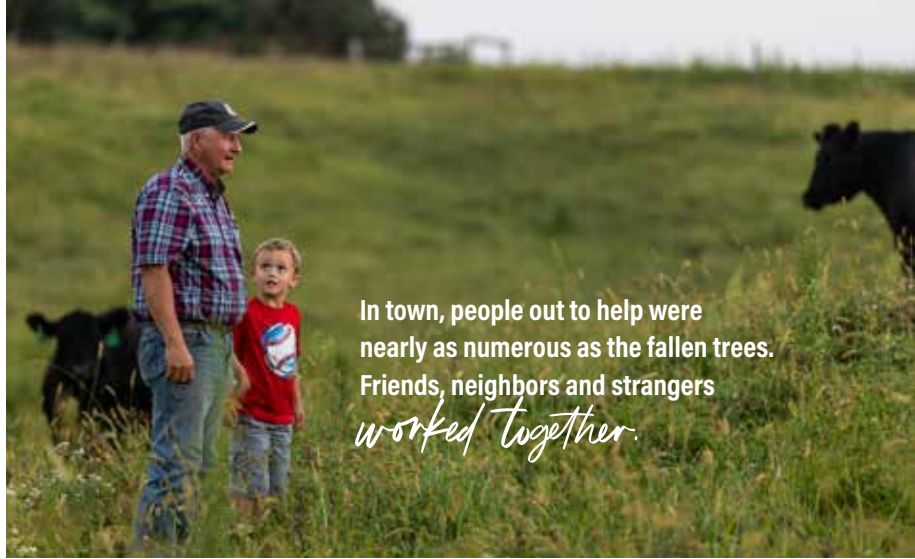
Every year, farmers and ranchers somewhere get knocked down by natural disasters, and communities always come together. That often leaves people from all across the United States wondering, "How can we help?"

In fall 2019, the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand created the Rural Relief Fund as a way to provide support.

"It's really just getting started, but this is a tangible way we can help those involved in the beef business when people are hurting," says Nicole Erceg, director of communications for the brand. "When cattlemen are in trouble, we all feel it."

"With less than a year since its formation, we were able to support efforts with the wildfires out West and with the derecho in the Midwest," she says.

The fund launched with a special item auctioned off during the brand's 2019 annual conference,



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and from sales of the "Sheltering Generations — The American Barn," coffee table book. The book features 40 Angus families and the barns that built them (including the Schroeder family of Iowa), and every penny goes back into the fund.

"It's humbling to think that we might be able to help in a bigger way in the future," Erceg says.

To purchase "Sheltering Generations" for \$19.95, or directly donate to the Rural Relief Fund, visit shop.certifiedangusbeef.com. 