

# Cornhuskers' Catastrophe

*The devastation of spring storms and flooding in Nebraska are continuing to add up, but the full effect has yet to be realized.*

*by Troy Smith, field editor*

It's the job of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) National Centers for Environmental Information to chronicle weather-related disasters and analyses of their impacts. Information on the agency's website includes the following statement: "The scale and complexity of a disaster greatly influences the length of time to assess the losses."

Wow, ya think? Farmers and ranchers affected by mid-March's Winter Storm Ulmer can attest to that. For many of them, even months after the storm, the costs continue to mount.

Winter Storm Ulmer should make NOAA's to-do list, though, since the agency's analysts are most interested in disasters with price tags of \$1 billion or more. Nebraska officials estimate losses attributed to Ulmer at \$1.3 billion, with about two-thirds of that tally representing losses to the state's agricultural sector. That figure does not include the losses that neighboring states experienced as a result of a storm that weather forecasters called a "bomb cyclone."

Also from the meteorologists' lexicon came "bombogenesis," the term describing a weather phenomenon involving the collision of warm and cold air masses and rapidly dropping

atmospheric pressure to create a storm with hurricane-like rotation. Starting to build intensity on March 11, the storm moved east from southern California to the southern Rocky Mountains. It was then dubbed a bomb cyclone, the storm next swept across the Plains and into the upper Midwest.

## West Nebraska

March 13 was the stormiest day for most Nebraskans, with blizzard conditions in the western part of the state and in neighboring

portions of Colorado, Wyoming and South Dakota. Nebraska snow accumulation was highest in the northern Panhandle, with up to 17 inches reported in the Chadron area. Sustained winds of 40 mph and gusts of 70 to 75 mph formed drifts up to 10 feet high. Heavy snow and high winds severely reduced visibility, and drifting made it difficult for ranchers to deliver feed and bedding for cattle. Many ranchers were in the midst of calving season and reports of calf losses were variable and, on average, similar to what cattlemen might



expect from late-winter/early-spring storms on the High Plains.

## East Nebraska

Central and eastern Nebraska saw the same gusty winds but enough warmer temperatures that precipitation changed from snow and sleet to a steady rain. The rain caused unusually rapid melting of snow that had accumulated during an already long, cold winter. With frost still in the ground, rainwater and snowmelt ran to creeks and rivers still high from last fall's precipitation. Thick layers of ice on these waterways broke up and started moving downstream. Slabs of ice up to 20 inches thick jammed at many bridges. Behind these chokepoints, waters ran over their banks, across adjacent pastures and fields and onto roads.

Record flooding levels were seen at multiple locations along the Niobrara, Elkhorn, Loup, Platte and

Missouri rivers. Several towns and small cities were flooded and at least partially evacuated. Thousands of homes and other structures were destroyed by waters carrying huge slabs of ice.

Farming and ranching in northeastern Nebraska for well over a century, Anthony Ruzicka's family had seen the Niobrara River spill over its banks before. This time was different. The operation is located some 40 miles downriver from the Spencer hydroelectric dam which gave way on March 14, releasing an 11-foot wall of water and ice that rushed downstream and across land adjacent to the river. In about two hours, the torrent swept through Ruzicka's headquarters, destroying corrals, outbuildings and a home. Also swept away was Ruzicka's battery of breeding bulls — all 12 head. The cows had been relocated previously to calving grounds away from headquarters. However, 15

calves also died during the storm.

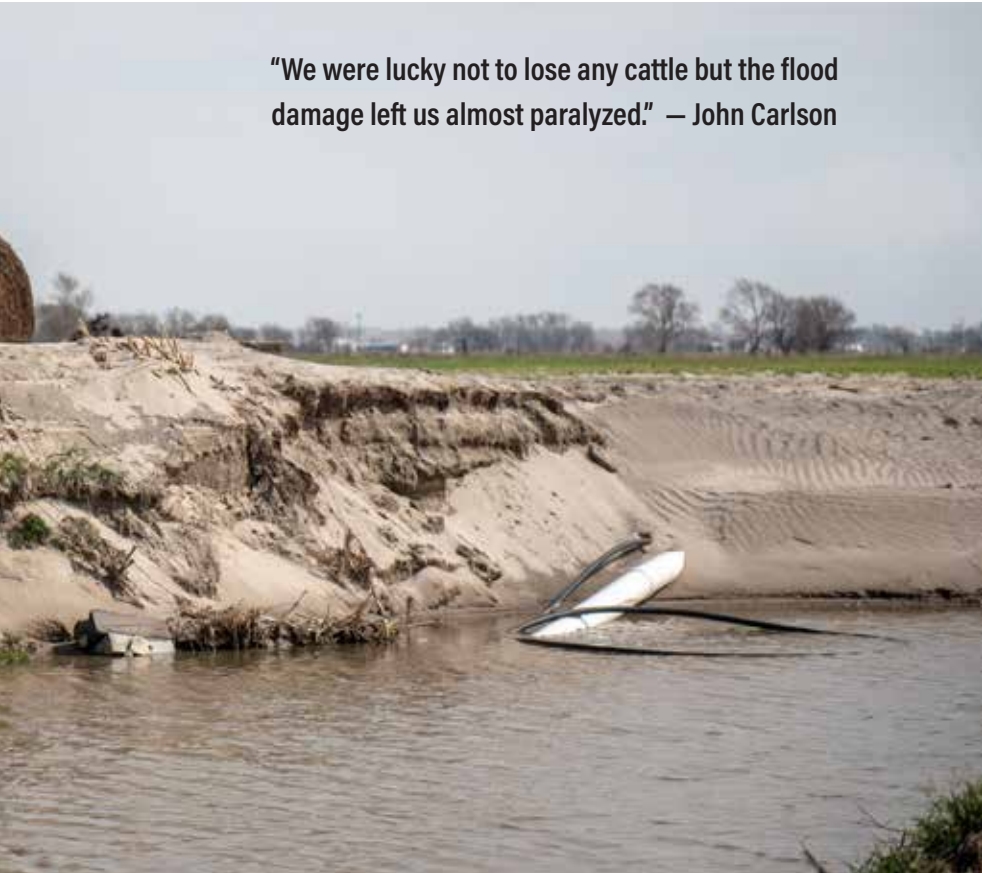
Angus breeder John Carlson's operation is located west of Columbus, Neb., between the Loup and Platte rivers. One of his neighbors lost 200 cow-calf pairs in the flooding and a nearby cattle feeding operation lost a similar number of animals. Swine losses were high in area farrowing and finishing barns too.

"Thankfully, we didn't lose a single critter," Carlson says, telling how his feedyard sits about two-and-a-half miles south of the Loup River, whose overflow spread to within three quarters of a mile of the site. High water was diverted from its channel because of an eight-mile-long ice jam located downstream, near the Loup's confluence with the Platte.

"We were lucky not to lose any cattle but the flood damage left us almost paralyzed," Carlson adds, explaining how along a three-mile stretch of the road running from his feedyard to town, the roadbed had washed out in five places, leaving gaps up to 100 yards long and three to four feet deep. Washouts and collapsed or damaged bridges were common on highways and country roads throughout parts of eastern and central Nebraska.

According to reports, about 3,300 miles of Nebraska roads were closed during the storm and at the height of flooding. That doesn't include all rural roads. Twenty-eight bridges on state highways were closed due to flooding and resulting damage. Add to that a still uncounted number of county and township bridges.

"Checking cattle, hauling feed or doing almost anything was a real struggle for weeks after the flood. You had to take roundabout routes to go almost anywhere.



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PHOTOS BY KAREN HILTBRAND

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Even now, months after the storm, transportation can be challenging," Carlson says. "The frequent rains that came after the storm made it hard to make repairs. And there has been some recurring flooding because the ground is just so saturated. Our place was a collection point for relief efforts, but the roads stayed so bad that it was hard to truck in the donated feed and supplies."

Stormy March 13 was the original date of the Bar Lazy D's annual production sale, and the offering had already been delivered to the sale facility — about an hour-long haul from owner Scott Beck's seedstock operation near Genoa, Neb. Beck rescheduled the sale for two weeks later and hauled the cattle home after the storm and flooding subsided. The back-haul took nearly four hours because of the bad roads and detours.

"We had to postpone the sale a second time because of rain. It was so muddy we couldn't get semis in to haul cattle to the sale barn again," Beck says. "We finally held our sale on April 16, and had a good sale. We had a lot of inconvenience and extra cost, but a lot of other people had it far worse."

Soddened supplies of hay and other feed resources, grain stocks soaked and spoiled in the bin and mangled structures of all kinds were common. Floodwaters cut deep gullies and gaping holes in farm fields and deposited layers of river sand on surfaces of pastures and meadows located adjacent to waterways. The degree to which individual operations were damaged depended on specific location and topography, with farms and ranches nearest runaway rivers typically hit the hardest.

## Counting losses

State officials and agricultural organization staffers say one of the questions they hear most frequently, in the wake of the storm and subsequent flooding is "How many livestock were lost?" It was erroneously reported that almost a million calves died, just in Nebraska — an exaggerated number. Certainly, thousands were lost, but Nebraska Department of Agriculture director Steve Wellman has called it nearly impossible to accurately tally the total numbers of animals. He said that trying to do so might be a waste of time. Pete McClymont, executive vice president of the Nebraska Cattlemen, thinks Wellman may be right.

"This was a different kind of event whose damage continues to be revealed over time," McClymont says, noting how many animals were buried under ice, mud and debris, while others were swept miles away from home farms and ranches. Many of those cannot be matched with their owners and some animals may never be found.

According to McClymont, various commodity organizations and representatives of state and federal government agencies met multiple times in the days following what Nebraska Governor Pete Ricketts called the most widespread disaster in the state's history. They estimated losses due to Winter Storm Ulmer and related flooding for a report accompanying Ricketts' request for federal disaster declaration. The report included an estimated \$438 million cost associated with infrastructure damage (roads, bridges, etc.) and \$85 million for destruction of homes and places of business. Crop losses attributable to the storm and flooding were estimated to be \$400 million. Cattle

losses were estimated at another \$400 million, with the lion's share borne by the cow-calf segment.

McClymont says all segments of the cattle industry have struggled with the ongoing costs of damaged infrastructure and how that complicates transportation of cattle, feedstuffs, supplies and equipment.

"For all impacted operations, it means increased costs for fuel and labor. Increased wear and tear on equipment means more maintenance costs. And it just takes more time and more money to do the everyday things," McClymont adds. "We estimated the Nebraska cattle industry's increased cost of doing business during the early days following the disaster at \$1 million per day."

## Assistance poured in and out

To help, the Nebraska Cattlemen launched its own disaster relief fund channeling 100% of received donations to cattle producers affected by the disaster. By early June, McClymont reports, contributions were "bumping up against \$1.5 million." The Nebraska Farm Bureau Foundation also established a program to provide emergency aid to farmers, ranchers and rural communities. According to the Foundation's director, Megahn Schafer, roughly \$1 million has been distributed so far, with more than \$2 million in the pool for this summer's second-round distribution. Other local and state relief efforts have been successful in collecting hay and feed, fencing materials, veterinary supplies and other goods for distribution to stricken cattle operations.

Spokesperson Bobbie Kriz-Wickham says USDA Farm Service Agency offices across Nebraska saw a significant level of traffic as farmers



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and ranchers sought assistance through the Livestock Indemnity Program (LIP) and the Emergency Conservation Program (ECP). LIP compensates livestock producers for weather event-related death losses in excess of “normal” mortality for such events. Payment is based on 75% of average fair market value for the livestock lost.

“As of June 1, Nebraska FSA had paid out just a bit over \$1 million in LIP payments for losses (including all livestock species) since January,” Kriz-Wickham says, noting that the total would include any weather-related losses occurring prior to the March storm.

The ECP provides cost-share assistance to landowners for rehabilitation of farmland and pastures damaged by natural disasters. Forty-eight Nebraska counties were authorized to accept ECP applications for assistance with fence restoration and repair, debris removal, and landscape reshaping.

“There has been a great deal of interest in this program and Nebraska FSA has received roughly 3,400 applications (as of early June),” Kriz-Wickham adds.

Nebraska State Conservationist Craig Derickson, with the Natural

Resource Conservation Service, says that agency began a special initiative to the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) to assist with dead livestock disposal. Some producers have applied.

“We’ve helped dispose of 1,466 animals, but I’m sure that was just the tip of the iceberg,” Derickson says. “I’m sure that many producers simply didn’t ask for help. They took care of it themselves.”

Derickson has no idea how many cattle might have died as a result of the storm and floods — no idea what the total financial consequences might be. He suspects that many of the survivors were battered and bruised, stressed and weakened to some degree. How far-reaching will those insults be? How will those animals’ subsequent health and performance be affected?

“All of that represents additional costs resulting from the storm, but I don’t know how to measure them,” Derickson states.

Also uncertain are the effects that delayed or prevented planting of crops will have on markets. That’s not due to the mid-March storm alone, but its heavy rains and flooding set the stage for prolonged and widespread saturation of soils. In

some areas, continued wet weather patterns have slowed or prevented drying. USDA analysts have scaled back grain harvest predictions for the year, based on so-called prevented-plant acreage of 6.7 million acres for corn, and 2.2 million acres for soybeans. How will that affect grain prices and prices paid for cattle?

Another natural disaster-related cost that is talked about least of all is the mental or emotional toll. Financial impacts, uncertainty about the future and damage to family legacy and culture cause stress that can be manifested as anxiety, depression, burnout and indecision. Even when there is no heavy loss of livestock or other property, there can be an emotional cost. Columbus, Neb., breeder John Carlson says it’s due to the “paralysis” stemming from the disruption of life as we know it.

“After the the big storm, every time it rained we had a little more flooding and a little more damage — more delays and disruption. It kept your guts churned up,” Carlson says. “It does feel good to talk about it now. I guess it’s a kind of therapy.” [A](#)