



PHOTOS COURTESY OF NICHOLS FARMS

Despite the circumstances, everyone remained calm when the tornado hit.

“I was really scared,” says Lillian Nichols, Dave’s sister-in-law and business partner. “It happened so quickly that I didn’t have time to think.”

According to Lillian, no one uttered a word in the basement. When the air pressure dropped and the tornado roared above them, she feared the house would collapse. After the sounds of shattering glass and splitting wood ceased a few minutes later, they all ran outside to assess the damage.

The war zone

“It looked like Kosovo,” Dave says. “The farm was covered with shards of metal and debris. Power lines were down. Buildings were gone. Everything was a mess.”

Dave immediately ran to check the 200 bulls in the main 330-foot barn. One-third of the barn was completely gone and one-third of the barn was still standing. The tornado had ripped off the remaining portion of the barn’s roof.

Every bull survived. Fortunately all had escaped the disaster with only minor scrapes and pulled muscles.

“The bulls were scared to death,” Havens says. “We actually had to push them to make them move to safety.”

Less than 15 minutes after the tornado hit, family and friends arrived on the scene to help move bulls to different pastures. Neither Nichols’ semitrailer nor truck and trailer could be used to transport the cattle. The tornado had lifted the heavy equipment off the ground and turned them on their sides in a nearby ditch.

Amid the chaos and confusion, Dave knew he needed to count and to contain the cattle before dark.

He knew more than 250 cows and calves were grazing in the north pasture directly in the tornado’s path. The flying debris had injured five recipient cows and killed one calf. Another calf was missing for a

At War With the Wind

Mother Nature is a cunning opponent. While she often lays siege with prolonged heat or cold, precipitation or drought, she also can strike quickly and without warning. Nichols Farms, Bridgewater, Iowa, has experienced the fury of her most unpredictable weapon — the tornado.

BY JENNIFER HOTCHKISS



Despite the warnings, they never thought it would happen to them.

But Mother Nature proved it could.

On Thursday, April 8, 1999, a cloudy day turned into an unexpected disaster when a tornado swept through Nichols Farms near Bridgewater, Iowa. In less than a minute the tornado caused \$140,000 worth of damage and transformed the farm into a war zone.

Reality strikes

Minutes before the tornado

touched down, Ross Havens, an employee at Nichols Farms, opened the office door just in time to see a bolt of lightning strike less than a quarter-mile away at a neighbor’s farm, killing five cows and three calves.

“The wind started picking up, and we knew we needed to get to Lillian’s house fast,” Havens says. “As I ran across the road, I looked back toward the office and saw two white funnel clouds racing toward us.”

While Havens and the other employees ran to the basement, Dave Nichols hurried to shut down the computers.

“When I left the office, I saw two of my employees jumping up and down and waving at me to hurry. I didn’t realize that the tornado was so close behind me. I reached the basement door just as the tornado hit. I bounded down the stairs in three steps — not too bad for a 60-year-old man,” Dave says.



day but eventually emerged from beneath some rubble in a ditch.

"We were thankful we didn't lose many cattle," Lillian says. "The rest of our cattle were within a 5-mile radius of the office, but, luckily, they were not in the path of the storm."

The aftermath

Meanwhile, friends, family and customers from the community were beginning to help put the pieces back together around the farm.

"It was rural America at its finest," Dave says. "Less than an hour after the tornado hit, the conference table in our office was covered with food. Backhoes, end loaders, chain saws and shovels were also brought in to clean up the mess."

While some attended to cleaning up debris, Dave organized a crew to clean feedbunks full of nails and shards of steel.

After the cattle were attended to, Dave began assessing the damage around the farm. The embryo transfer (ET) facilities, one-half mile north of the office, did not fare well. The tornado swept away the entire facility, including all of their ET and HeatWatch® equipment.

"Tornadoes act in such peculiar ways," Dave says. "Even though our ET facility was completely missing, the squeeze chute was still intact. One of our old card tables was also standing in the rubble with a roll of paper towels lying on top of it."

Even more amazing to Dave was the discovery of a semen tank, which was originally placed next to the card table, in a ditch one-fourth mile from the ET facility.

The tornado also damaged the Nichols' grain elevator and destroyed a few smaller buildings. More than two miles of fence were flattened by the winds. Prioritizing became a necessity with so many things to repair.

"In situations like this, you have to stop the bleeding first,"



"I've always been one of those guys who gets upset when weather warnings flash across the screen and disrupt me from my ball games. I never thought those things could happen to me," says Dave Nichols (in the red cap). On April 8, though, it did happen to him when a tornado hit the farm he and his sister-in-law, Lillian, operate near Bridgewater, Iowa. That night they were featured on the local news.

Dave says. "We attended to the things that needed to be taken care of that night — like rounding up the cattle and nailing plywood over the broken windows at Lillian's house."

Dave says he never imagined half of the problems they faced after the tornado. For example, the cattle normally were fed ground hay. However, the entire supply of ground hay was full

of nails, metal slivers, and chunks of wood and glass. Because they didn't own their own tub grinder, they had to hire help to get the hay ground.

"We were worried about the cattle going off feed anyway," Dave says. "We didn't want to compound the problem by changing their feed. It took more work to get the cattle fed, but it was worth it."

Moving forward

To top off an already busy season of calving and selling bulls, the Nicholsons now had to

include time to clean up and repair the damages done to their farm.

"We couldn't afford to miss a beat," Dave says. "We didn't let this disaster get us down. We dealt with the problems and moved on."

Nearly half of the total damages were covered by insurance. The damages to the bull barn, shop, ET facility and grain elevator, estimated at

\$70,000, were covered by their policy.

The other damages to the livestock, fences and small buildings were financed on their own. Dave estimates the additional repairs, new ET and

HeatWatch equipment, fences, gates, and additional hired help cost another \$70,000.

Unfortunately the state of Iowa was not able to provide any supplemental funding. Gov. Tom Vilsack visited Nichols Farms a few days after the tornado and declared their county a disaster area. He then directed inmates from state

correctional facilities to help clean up the damage.

Fifty inmates and prison guards arrived the following Monday morning. The Nichols family provided equipment and 20-by-8-by-8-foot silage trucks for the cleanup process in their county. At Nichols Farms alone, inmates buried 100 loads of trash.

"You never anticipate help like that," Dave says. "You just assume you'll have to deal with things on your own. We were fortunate that we didn't have to do everything by ourselves."

In appreciation for their hard work, the Nichols family provided a beef barbecue for the inmates and prison guards a week after the tornado. One inmate says it was the best meal that he'd had in the past two years, nine months and 14 days.

The extra help made the healing process much easier. Dave admits, however, that it wasn't always easy to maintain a positive attitude.

"It's hard to fight this 'I'm a victim' attitude," he says. "But you just can't worry about things over which you have no control."

New challenges arose every day. It rained for many days after the tornado. The mud and water slowed the cleanup process, which gave way to even more problems. At least once a day a truck, car or tractor would show up with a flat tire due to the nails and shards of steel lying around the farm.

Despite the financial, emotional and physical stresses from the tornado, Dave says he's fortunate.

"This tornado was a small deal," he says. "Big deals are when you lose your family or friends. Big deals are when you watch someone suffer from pain. This just required some bricks, mortar and tin. My main three concerns in life — my faith, family and friends — were not damaged by those winds."



**Barns, bulls, cows
and equipment
can be replaced.
People can't.
— Dave Nichols**