



► Freedom, Okla., Angus breeder Ky Luddington stands in a fenced-in lot that once held 300 round hay bales. What he lost is small, he says, compared to his fellow ranchers near the Oklahoma-Kansas border.

# Forged by Fire

Destructive wildfire in Oklahoma and Kansas leaves painful mark on rural communities and ranch families.

Story & photos by *Jena McReil*, digital editor

**S**tanding beside a worn gravel road near Freedom, Okla., Angus breeder Ky Luddington describes the unimaginable.

He points east across the valley, tracing the fire's path through the rugged horizon. To one side, the terrain is untouched: Dry

grassland ripples under the wind's strength, and clusters of cedar trees accent deep canyons and jagged hills.

The second perspective is scalded black. Luddington enters a fenced-in lot that once held 300 round hay bales, and with each step, small clouds of ashes ascend from the earth. Black soot and scorched ground crumble beneath his feet. Deep ash is all that remains, and the lot is completely empty.

The unforgiving landscape near the Oklahoma-Kansas border will hold the memory of the Anderson Creek Wildfire for seasons to come. Reported as the largest wildfire in Kansas state history, the flames engulfed more than 367,000 acres, and locals say it's considered among the largest private-lands wildfires in the United States. Countless farms and ranchers were devastated in its wake, and hundreds of head of livestock were lost — all a reminder of what is at risk when fire conditions are high.

One spark is all it takes.

"That first night, you were just surrounded by fire. It was one big, red glow," said Luddington, who had an uneasy feeling



PHOTO COURTESY OF OKLAHOMA FORESTRY SERVICES

► The Anderson Creek Wildfire sparked in northern Oklahoma and traveled nearly 50 miles northeast into Kansas, threatening thousands of homes and ranches within its path.

before the day even began on Tuesday, March 22, 2016.

The fifth-generation rancher is no stranger to wildfires, and the day's weather forecast put everyone on alert. Temperatures were unseasonably warm, topping 80° F, humidity was about 10%, and winds blasted up to 50 miles per hour — enough to make even the toughest cowboy sweat.

Luddington was driving home through the hills when he first saw the plume of smoke towering to the south. Within minutes, he and his son were among the first to arrive at the Anderson Creek crossing on northern Oklahoma's Highway 64. The sparks took hold right on the edge of the highway; an official source remains unknown.

"Have you ever been in a fire? You have trouble thinking. You have trouble doing the right thing in the right order," Luddington said.

He's seen the worst the country has to give and understands what's most important is how you respond. They immediately started moving cattle and assisting with hundreds of firefighters arriving from counties near and far. Even from the initial flames, it was clear the fire would demand an all-in effort.

### An unprecedented pace

For hours on end, ranchers worked alongside volunteer firemen to try and slow the flames. Feeling powerless against the gusting winds, they fought tirelessly as the fire began to widen and gain fuel in every direction. An overgrowth of red cedar trees intensified the fire's pace and strength. When the trees caught flame, locals say they would explode like gas cans and shoot flames up to 10 stories high.

Fire Chief Rick Wesley of Barber County, Kansas, described it as a rolling wildfire. Jumping a quarter mile ahead of itself, the fire would ignite new flames and roll forward to create an even stronger force.

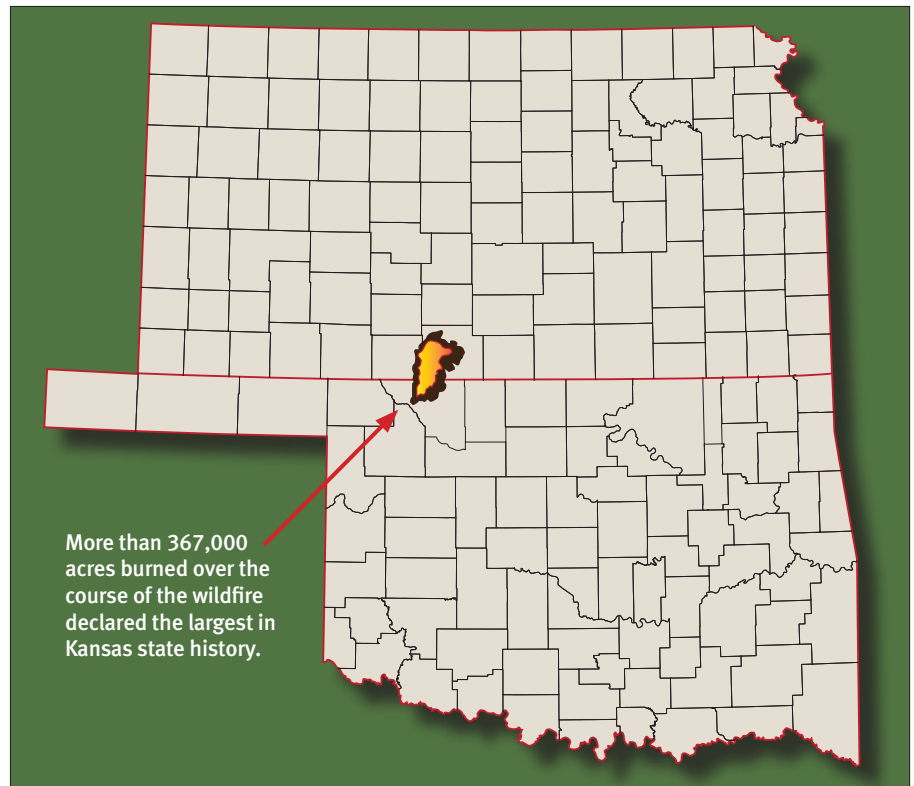
"I heard a couple of firefighters describe it as looking into the gates of hell," Wesley said. "It's just fire everywhere, and smoke — thick, dark smoke — that you could hardly breathe. You can't see all of it, but you know it's huge."

By sunset Tuesday, the Anderson Creek Wildfire crossed into Kansas. Reports of billowing smoke were recorded as far north as Omaha, Neb., and east into Saint Louis, Mo.

Wesley has been involved with the fire department for more than 20 years, as his father before him, and he had never experienced anything of this magnitude. His two sons were among the fire crews, and Wesley said it was unnerving at times watching them enter the flames.

"In a fire that size, your crews are stretched so thin," Wesley said. He paused for a moment. "The country out there is so

**Fig. 1: Area devastated by the Anderson Creek Wildfire**



rugged, and you're wandering in that thick smoke. It's just unbelievable."

Often unsung heroes in rural communities, hundreds of volunteer firefighters from all corners of Kansas and surrounding states put themselves at risk responding to the disaster's call. According to the Kansas Forest Service, more than 180 in-state entities assisted with efforts throughout the span of the Anderson Creek Wildfire, as well as organizations from five different states.

The response teams enlisted every type of defense: road graders, drip torches to light

backfires and a constant water supply. They set up controlled burns to eliminate the fire's fuel on their own terms. Considered a bold firefighting strategy, it did allow the flames to hold for a time.

Wednesday morning, a strong westerly wind advanced the flames in a sideways path of destruction. The fire grew to nearly 40 miles wide and threatened thousands of homes and ranches within its reach.

Crews entered into defense mode and set up firefighting lines around houses and buildings. They did their best to save the

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► On April 25, *The Angus Report* carried a special feature on the Anderson Creek Wildfire. Access the report at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ymc\\_4R\\_1zsQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ymc_4R_1zsQ).



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structures from the flames, but some were more fortunate than others.

“You can’t save them all. That’s the toughest part,” Luddington said. “People who lose their homes and cattle — there’s just no way to explain that.”

As far as the eye could see, the wildfire raged forward.

### A rancher’s nightmare

Cattleman Nate Harts said a wildfire like this humbles you.

He’s been ranching in the area for many years and had experience dealing with fire, but like most, nothing to this scale. The flames had traveled more than 45 miles from Oklahoma’s Anderson Creek when the fire entered his land near Sun City, Kan., Wednesday, March 23.

### Wildfire recovery

When hard times hit rural communities, fellow farmers, ranchers and neighbors do not sit idle. The Anderson Creek Wildfire’s massive scale was matched by an incredible outpouring of support that, to date, totals nearly \$400,000.

Todd Domer with the Kansas Livestock Association (KLA) said the organization has received more than \$365,000 from 20 states and more than 75 counties in Kansas. Donations ranged from large contributors, such as Farm Credit Associations of Kansas and CoBank, to smaller donations from church Sunday school classes, local CattleWomen groups, 4-H clubs and many generous individuals.

The financial support will be used to help offset the cost of fencing supplies, treatment of injured cattle and other priority needs identified by local KLA leadership in Comanche and Barber counties.

Individuals, organizations and companies can continue to make tax-deductible contributions to wildfire victims at [www.kla.org/donationform.aspx](http://www.kla.org/donationform.aspx) or by mailing a check to the Kansas Livestock Foundation, 6031 S.W. 37th, Topeka, KS 66614.

The Oklahoma Cattlemen’s Association has also collected more than \$35,000 through a relief fund for Woods County ranchers affected by the Anderson Creek Wildfire. The Oklahoma Cattlemen’s Foundation is coordinating with the Woods County Cattlemen’s Association and county extension to identify ranchers in need.

Visit [www.okcattlemen.org](http://www.okcattlemen.org) to donate online or mail a check to the Oklahoma Cattlemen’s Foundation (with “fire relief” in the memo line) to P.O. Box 82395, Oklahoma City, OK 73148.

“We were on a fire truck for a full day, trying to do what we could, and it was a pretty futile effort,” Harts said. “All we could do was open gates and let the cows move. With the wind and the humidity the way it was, we just were not able to put it out.”

Ranchers within the fire’s path had limited time to deliver their cattle to safety. That’s if they were lucky enough to have any time at all. Trapped in deep canyons or lost in a sea of smoke, countless head had nowhere to run from the fire’s unrelenting flames.

Those who were able to round up their herds and navigate the thick smoke sought out one safe haven: vibrant green wheat fields.

“Wheat fields are a green oasis in a sea of dry grass,” said Kansas State University (K-State) Extension Agent Tim Marshall. “People would take their vehicles, equipment, everything they could and drag it out onto a wheat field, because that was the only thing that you knew wasn’t going to burn.”

The fire would creep right to the edge of the green pasture, establishing a hard line between the charred earth and the moisture-rich wheat. Standing terrified in the fields, ranchers and their cattle would watch as fire enclosed them in every direction. At times, even a canopy of flames flickered overhead.

Once the fire started its rage, all they could do was wait.

The wildfire engulfed 95% of Harts’ ranch. He lost several head of cattle to the immediate flames, and expects that number to increase in the weeks and months ahead as he takes full inventory of the damage.

“The fire changed every aspect of what I’m going to do for the next year,” Harts said, “as far as grazing plans, rotational plans, cow numbers, the loss of livestock, the loss of fence. The short term is going to present a lot of challenges.”

An official number of livestock lost during the wildfire remains unknown; however, local ranchers have reported anywhere from 50-100 head from their individual herds. Spring-calving operations had hundreds of calves on the ground when the fire hit, and it will be several months before they truly grasp the fire’s devastation.

### Signs of hope

Wednesday turned to Thursday, Thursday to Friday, and the Anderson Creek Wildfire continued to burn. By Saturday, the surrounding communities were in despair, and it was evident that reinforcement was necessary.

“At one time, I don’t think anyone in Barber County felt safe,” said County Commissioner



► Black Hawk helicopters, deployed by the Kansas National Guard, ascended the sky on day four of the wildfire and brought new strength to the firefighting efforts.

PHOTO COURTESY OF BARBER COUNTY, KANSAS.

Paul Harbaugh, Medicine Lodge, Kan. “With the heat and magnitude of the fire, it was an inferno. Our locals, you can’t praise them enough. They were right there in the head fires trying to stop it, but it wasn’t stoppable.”

The Kansas National Guard was called into action Saturday, March 26, and deployed four Black Hawk helicopters that carried more than 45,000 gallons of water to extinguish the flames. The fire’s containment level was in the teens when the helicopters took flight, said Gaten Wood, Barber County attorney and agency administrator for the county management team.

By the next morning, they reached 31% containment — a number that still seemed small after four intense days fighting flames and combatting smoke. Early estimates cite more than \$1 million in firefighting expenses, Wood said, indicating the resources necessary for a fire of this scale. That does not account for infrastructure damage to the county’s roads and bridges, and the large amount of repairs that will take place in the months ahead.

“What transitioned Friday through Sunday was simply: How do we recover?” Wood said. “How do we help the farmers who have lost everything — from their cattle to their pasture rotations, and the hay that they had stored. We also lost somewhere around 1,000 miles of barbed-wire fences.”

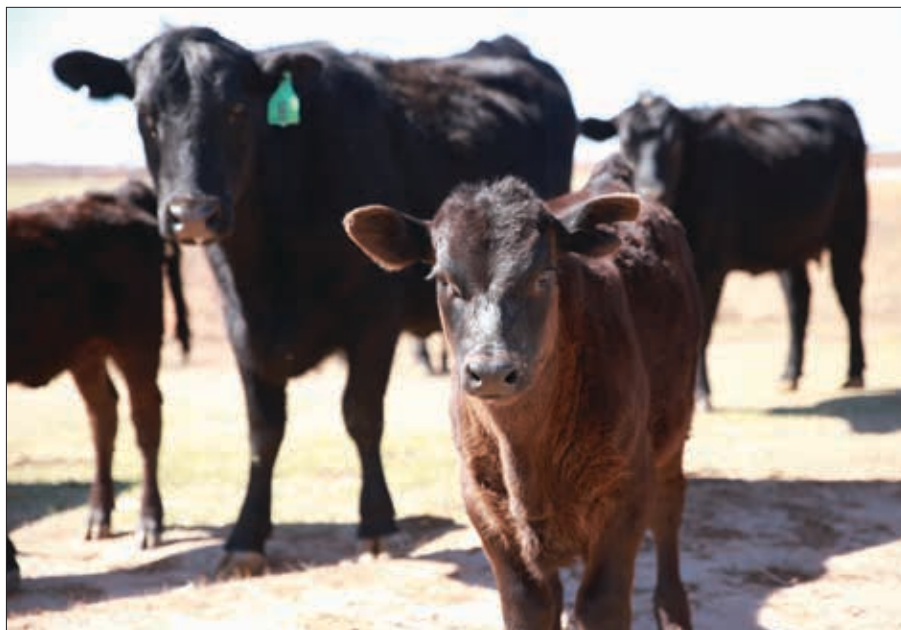
Once the fire burned through all it could reach, forceful winds remained. The remaining ash and soot were scattered into the air. At times, the landscape looked like a dust storm. Wood said from an aerial view, the entire region reminded him of a desert. The ground was completely barren. Even the fire’s black remnants were blown away. Throughout the uncertain days surrounding the disaster, stress was high and hope was growing slim.

Then, on Easter Sunday, March 27, the rangeland was blanketed white.

Up to 3 inches of snow fell in the early hours and provided much-needed moisture to the land so desperate for relief. A glimpse of pure white after days of darkness gave those in the fire’s path a bit of encouragement, as well. Sunday morning, the Kansas National Guard scraped snow and ice from the helicopters and set back to work delivering water to the region’s most active hot spots.

It was nearly two weeks before the Anderson Creek Wildfire was officially contained. More than 570 square miles were left scarred by the flames. Despite the fire’s massive scale and speed, Barber County reports only 11 structures destroyed and, most importantly, zero fatalities.

“Someday we will say that the fire did a



► The official number of cattle lost during the Anderson Creek Wildfire remains unknown, and area ranchers will be faced with a number of herd health issues as a result of the smoke inhalation.

lot of good. It burned a lot of cedar trees and country that needed it,” Luddington said. “Right now, it’s hard to say that with the loss of cattle. We’re just thankful there was no loss of [human] life. If you’d have been here and seen that many fire trucks driving through that much smoke and that rough of country, we’re thankful somebody was looking out for us.”

In the coming weeks and months, cattle will be gathered, fences rebuilt, structures repaired and lives brought back together. It won’t be an easy process, but many of the ranchers and individuals affected by the Anderson Creek Wildfire say they’re encouraged by the incredible support shown by neighbors near and far.

Within the first 24 hours of the fire, hay donations and financial support started pouring in from all directions. Truckloads of round hay bales were parked in Medicine Lodge, Kan., ready to be delivered once it was safe to do so. For the ranchers who lost a majority of their hay reserves, the donations were an indescribable blessing.

“In the face of adversity, you realize there are a lot of good people in the world,” Harts said. “I’m not sure where I would be without folks coming through like they did. There’s no way to repay them for loading up hay and heading this way.”

Ranchers along the Oklahoma-Kansas border are not strangers to fire.

Controlled burns are often a practical and effective land management strategy. The parched grassland seems to beckon for it, but when the humidity is low and winds are high, locals stay on alert and do

their best to respond to the flames and then repair the destruction left behind. In times of unthinkable disaster, the resilient nature of America’s rural communities rings true.

Even before the Anderson Creek Wildfire was completely extinguished, the tiny community of Freedom, Okla., made national headlines once again. Blasting winds from the south fueled another fire that burned 57,000 acres over three days.

When the conditions are right, one spark is all it takes.

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► The region received several inches of rain during the weeks following the wildfire, which will boost pasture recovery in the months ahead.