

Rural America Rises:

Tempered by Fire

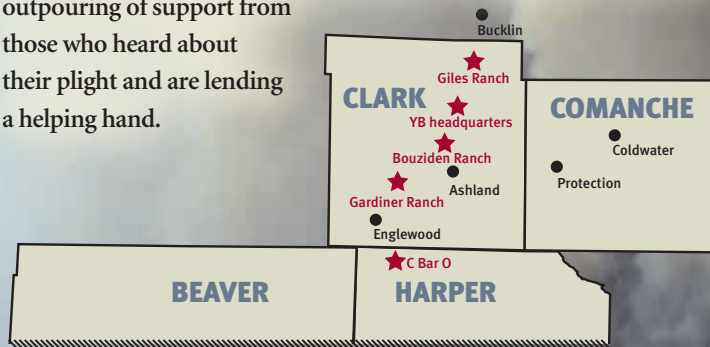
Tested by the largest range fire in Kansas history, ranchers find strength in the support of their fellow man.

by *Shauna Rose Hermel*, editor

Watching a video documenting the devastation of the fires that broke out March 6, Mark Gardiner winces at the frames showing dead cattle lined up for burial. It isn't just a movie. It's all too real. Those cows, the ground they grazed and the people they bring together are the passion, not to mention the livelihood, of he and his family.

The Ashland, Kan., Angus breeder is one of hundreds of ranchers affected by fires that consumed two-thirds of his home county's acreage and more than 1.5 million acres in the three-state area of Texas, Oklahoma and Kansas. In a community where the local bank is still called the Stockgrowers State Bank, the long-term impact for the community will indeed be great.

However, Gardiner and fellow ranchers in Clark County and surrounding areas are looking forward to rebuilding, bolstered by the outpouring of support from those who heard about their plight and are lending a helping hand.



A call goes out

It was about 12:30 in the afternoon March 6 when Andy Cunningham, a volunteer for the Rosston Volunteer Fire Department in Harper County, Okla., got the call. High winds had snapped power lines, causing a grass fire in Beaver County to the west.

Grass fires aren't unusual in this area of the country, says Cunningham, but as he rode the fire truck to the scene, he could tell this fire was going to be a bad one.

With his family's 8,000 acres of leased grassland and herd of 300 cows potentially in its path, Cunningham called his wife, Kodell, and asked her to pull son Keb, 14, and daughter Rayli, 16, out of school and move their cows off grass onto a wheat field to the south.

As did many of the volunteer firefighters called into action that day, Cunningham worked with fire crews to put out the blaze while his family coaxed the C Bar O herd to greener pastures. His cell phone battery depleted, he checked in when he could borrow a phone, while his family monitored the progress of the fire listening to reports on CB radios.

— Gardiner Angus Ranch —

Neighbors to the north, their ranches divided by a state line, the crew at Gardiner Angus Ranch, Ashland, Kan., spent the morning gathering fall pairs off wheat to collect 205-day weights and measures and to give vaccinations.

Mark Gardiner noticed smoke to the southwest at about 12:30-1 p.m. With the wind coming directly from the south, he says he wasn't worried about the fire reaching their ranch; he was more concerned about neighbors to the west.

Climbing into his pickup, he headed to Englewood, Kan., and then on to a neighbor's 10 miles further west. They

could see the fire burning 10-15 miles in the distance. With the wind blowing strongly from the south, they agreed their best course of action was to stay out of the way of emergency crews.

Mark headed home to prepare for Tuesday's embryo transfer (ET) donor implantation, checking on a couple other neighbors' places on the way home.

— Giles Ranch —

Twenty miles or so to the northeast, the Giles family gathered for lunch and their traditional Monday organizational meeting. Parents Roger and Cathy Giles partner with three of their four daughters — Jenny Betschart, Katie Shaw and Molly Beckford — in the commercial cow-calf and stocker-feeder operation located between Ashland and Bucklin, Kan.

Noticing that smoke to the southwest was moving into the valley south of the ranch office, they checked in with the local fire department.

"All the fires were at Englewood at that point," Jenny recalls, though one of Roger's friends near Englewood "jokingly, but seriously" commented that, if the wind kept up, the fire would be to their ranch in a couple of hours.

"After that, we started thinking about getting the horses caught and what we'd need to do to move things around," says Molly.

They told Katie, who had stayed home to tend a daughter recovering from a tonsillectomy and three other of the ranch's fifth generation, to sit tight as they formulated a game plan. With four children ages 5 and under in her care, she asked her husband, Brett Shaw, to come home from his family's business, Shaw Feedyard.

Preparing to help those impacted by the fire, Molly's husband, C.J., who works at

Giles Ranch, loaded their water truck to haul water to the fire south of the ranch.

"My mom and my nieces made a bunch of sandwiches for all the firemen and got some bottled water, and I loaded up a cooler that I was going to send with my husband," Molly recounts. A call from her dad put them on hold.

Another fire had started to their west. Thinking it would clip the northwest corner of the ranch, Roger headed there to move two groups of cattle that would be in direct line of the fire. The rest of the family remained ready.

Shifting winds

As Mark Gardiner returned home, his wife, Eva, said a friend from near Englewood (not home at the time) was concerned her house was on fire. When she wouldn't be consoled by the fact Mark had just come from that area, Mark and Eva said they would go back and check.

"We got 3 or 4 miles headed back that way and I said, 'Oh my, Eva, it's right there,'" Mark recalls. Within the hour the wind had switched and was now coming from the west. The fire was 6-7 miles from their house, and all Mark could see was prairie grass in between.

"We turned around right there," says Mark. "We drove as fast as we could without wrecking to get back to the house."

Says Eva, "We were thinking, Ok, I'll hook up my pickup to the trailer and get the three horses here out. We'll get the dogs, get what we need and leave. We still thought we had time."

As she headed to the horse barn south of the house to collect the horses she fed every day, Mark headed to the house.

"It hit the house at the same time we got there," Mark says. He found the two family

CONTINUED ON PAGE 48



Rural America Rises: Tempered by Fire CONTINUED FROM PAGE 47

dogs, but frightened, they wouldn't cooperate. Eva had gotten the horses in the pen, but they were too rattled to try to load, so she joined Mark in the house.

"The house was on fire, and it was filling up with smoke. Eva went to the North side of the house and I lost her," says Mark, forgetting about the dogs. "You couldn't hear because of the roar of the fire, and with the wind and the smoke you couldn't see very good."

Mark looked out a window and could see Eva's pickup was gone. He was confident she had left and headed to a safer location.

"I thought, I'd better get out of here," he recalls, noting that he grabbed what he could on the way out — some baby pictures off the dresser, a box of letters he and Eva had written to each other over the years, and the diplomas and honor cords earned by sons Ransom and Cole upon graduating from Kansas State University (K-State).

Flames shot over him as he exited the house and ran to the pickup, opening the passenger door to deposit the keepsakes. Later firemen would tell him it was 80-100 mph winds that blew his hat away and embers into the pickup as he struggled to shut the door.

With the dirt and smoke too thick to see through, he used the edge of the road as a guide, looking down through an open door as he had done so many cold mornings when he was too impatient to wait for the windshield to defrost. As he drove around the circle drive, the courtyard Eva had designed in front of the house gave him bearing, and he found his escape route.

Pushed by the strong winds, the fire quickly consumed the windbreak and grass surrounding the couple's home, blowing through the ranch headquarters in little more than 30 minutes.

Mark circled back around to his house, coming in from the west.

"Our horse barn was on fire, but we still had water there, so I started putting it out," he recalls. Eva and Ransom, who had both made it to a nearby wheat field, came back to help.

— *C Bar O Ranch* —

"Most of the time, even a big fire on a windy day will burn to a wheat field and stop," Cunningham shares. This fire had a long path of grass, and strong, shifting winds made it nearly unmanageable.

"When you fight a fire, you fight the head of the fire and clean up the flanks

later," he explains, noting that as the fire raced east, it was long and narrow. "Then, about 4:30 or 5 in the afternoon the wind switched and went equally as hard out of the north. ... All of a sudden the head of the fire [was] 40 miles wide, and there was nothing you could do."

The fire burned straight east along the north side of Cunningham's leased pasture until the wind shifted, he explains, noting that the fire that claimed his ranch and the Gardiners' was dubbed the Starbuck Fire. "That's when it burned our pastures."

Night of close calls

North of Ashland, David Bouziden of Bouziden Ranch was disking to create a fireguard north of his house. A highline northwest of the ranch had been downed by tree limbs and started a separate fire. Bouziden knew the fire was coming, but watching the dust the disc stirred up for a change in wind direction, he was confident he would have time to get away. He nearly didn't.

A wall of dirt and smoke enveloped him, Bouziden recounts. He pointed his tractor toward where he thought his pickup was, drove through a fence and hit the edge of a

CONTINUED ON PAGE 50

►Below: Garth Gardiner of Gardiner Angus Ranch, Ashland, Kan., saw the flames as they roared through the family's artificial insemination (AI) center (to the left) and Mark and Eva Gardiner's home and yard (to the right).



PHOTO COURTESY GARTH GARDINER

►Below: Hay stacks smolder at Gardiner Angus Ranch March 7. At this one ranch, the fire consumed 6,800 large round bales, 550 head of cattle, Mark and Eva Gardiner's home and an estimated 270 miles of fence.



PHOTO BY TIM TYBEE, TYBEE AG, COURTESY GARDINER ANGUS RANCH



PHOTO BY SHAUNA ROSE HERMEL

►Left: Rancher Mike Harden is credited by many for saving the town of Ashland, Kan., which at one point was surrounded by fire. Harden used tractor and disc to plow fireguards around the school, hospital and several homes to the south and west of town. Bouziden-Walker Farms' wheat fields to the north and east also offered a buffer.

BACKGROUND PHOTO BY NEIL KAY

It takes a village

Small community unites with support from all over the country following devastation by wildfires.

"It's just been put on hold," Melanie Hink candidly says of her flower shop on Main Street. The Ashland, Kan., native certainly isn't without work, though. She may have 30 years in the floral design business, but she has nearly as many invested in Ashland's Christian Church Camp — and right now, it's her top priority.

She looks right at home sitting at a round table in the camp's mess hall. She's spent a few hours in this kitchen, preparing meals for youth attending church camp in the summers. A member of the First Christian Church, she also does a good bit of the cooking there, too. Quite simply, she likes to cook.

"They think this is my kitchen," she laughs. "It's not just *my* kitchen. It takes everybody. It's taken a lot of people to make this work."

By "this," she means the Christian Service Camp, which has been operating on a daily basis since the March 6 wildfires near Ashland and Englewood devastated area farms and ranches. As volunteers from states across the country poured in to assist with fire relief, it became

evident that there would need to be a central gathering place for weary volunteers, fire and rescue workers, and farmers and ranchers.

"Without this facility, I don't know what we would have done with all these volunteers," Hink says. "We were definitely blessed, in that respect, to have this facility we could use."

Three weekends after the fires burned more than 470,000 acres in Clark County alone, Hink says the camp served more than 200 volunteers in one night.

It started in the basement of the First Christian Church the night after the fire. Hink says a member of their congregation lost their home, and "we just felt compelled to take care of them," she says. With help from the "church family," Hink and others made almost 700 breakfast burritos to be distributed to volunteers the first week. "Then it just got too big," she says.

They moved to a closed restaurant in town, but they still needed more room. Hink and her crew put out a plea to clean up the camp, and the show was on.

Nationwide support

Rock Hill, a Michigan native and Ashland transplant, serves as Hink's "morning duty." She prepares the food the night before, and Hill arrives at dawn to serve early volunteers.

"I'm still surprised we haven't made national news," Hill observes. "That shocks so many people here."

National news or not, the agriculture community on its own has generated enough support to give hope to those near and far.

"It does give you a warm heart to think of all the people that have been helping," says Kim Hazen, office manager for Home Lumber in Ashland. She's been helping keep track of volunteers and coordinate them with farmers and ranchers in need of labor.



PHOTOS BY SHELBY METTLER

▶ "It's remarkable," says Kim Hazen, referring to the number and variety of volunteers who have shown up to help. Hazen volunteers her time to help match volunteers to those in need.



▶ "Without this facility, I don't know what we would have done with all these volunteers," says Melanie Hink, who has organized meal preparations at the Christian Service Camp in Ashland.

evening, a hot meal is prepared and "we serve until the last one comes in," Hink says. Hazen says a typical day is 6 a.m. to 11 p.m.

Hink calls the generosity "overwhelming."

"Everyone has stepped up and helped," she says. "I've lived here all my life and I've never lived through this. It makes you cry," she pauses. "We'll get through this, and we'll be stronger."

Hazen agrees.

"We pull up our boots, and we keep going," Hazen says, noting that she has a list of callers who plan to come in June and July. "You think, 'Surely we'll be getting close to done [by then],' and then you look at our list of 140 producers who need help and we think, 'No, we can't. We won't be done by then,'" she says.

Some estimates say the fencing may be done in a year, but it's hard to say, she says.

"It has made us stronger," she says, wiping teary eyes, "by a long shot. And we'll never be able to repay these people, but believe me, the first time we hear people needing something, we'll be there."

Having hope

"I grew up here; this is home," says a teary Hink. "It's hard to watch. It's hard to see the devastation."

Despite the devastation, the optimism and spirit of rural America shines brightly. Hink isn't concerned that the support will taper off; she thinks it's here to stay.

"I think the support will be here as long as the need is here," she says. "I don't doubt that. To me, the country was just in total chaos, and this is kind of," she pauses, "giving you a new outlook."

"It's going to take a village to put our little place back together," she says. "It's going to take everybody."

— by *Shelby Mettler*, assistant editor

hay shed. Getting off the tractor, he followed the fence posts to where he could see his pickup and drove it out into the wheat field south of the house to wait out the fire.

"When the fire came through here, it was going in excess of 60 miles per hour. It was unbelievable," says Bouziden. "Dodge City clocked winds at 67 pretty much sustained, and when you get a fire like this, it creates its own wind.

"I saw more than one fire tornado," he continues. "The one that really impressed me, I bet that thing was 500 feet in the air. You know how a dirt devil will go way up. That's what this did, but fire and sparks were coming out of it. It was like Armageddon."

— Giles Ranch —

The situation deteriorated quickly at the Giles Ranch, as well. Within an hour of feeling confident the fire would just clip the northwest corner of the ranch, the family learned there was a fire to the west and a change in wind direction put the ranch in its path.

As Brett headed to help Katie, the rest of the family and intern Laura Burandt dispersed on horseback or in pickups to push cattle to wheat pasture. When Jenny and Roger pulled into a pasture near Katie's house, they saw fire within a half mile and called to warn her.

Brett and Katie took the four toddlers to the ranch office at the Young Brothers headquarters (the YB). Brett headed back to the house to collect a few things; Katie stayed with the children until her mom could arrive, then hooked onto the trailer and headed to her parents' house to help Jenny and Roger, who were trying to rescue horses there.

The wind had switched directions again and was now pushing flames into the farmyard from the north.

"When I stepped out, you could feel the heat from the fire," Katie recalls. With the horses spooked and the fire close, loading them became an impossibility.

"We did what we thought you were supposed to do and turned the horses loose, and we left," says Jenny. They never expected to see her parents' house again.

Katie headed south to get rid of her trailer; Jenny and Roger started cutting fence.

"Two of the groups of cattle we cut for, I assume in the confusion of it, turned around and ran into the flames instead of coming toward us," Jenny shares. "That was pretty hard to see."

"We finally decided it was coming too fast and everybody needed to get off," says Jenny.

Molly was cutting one last fence to move a group through when she got the call to

immediately head east and regroup with family in Protection.

C.J. and Laura had taken the trailer back to the YB — to the west — to get horses there. They had them loaded when the fire hit. They made it to a hay barn next to the house and were able to ride it out there, saving the barn in the process.

Katie tried to exit, but was surrounded by flames and smoke.

"I was on the phone with Jenny at that point, and she had Dad beside her, and they both said, 'Get to a wheat field,'" Katie recalls. Fortunately, she found her way onto a wheat field. Unfortunately, it was the narrowest wheat field they own.

"I sat there while the fire blew over me," Katie recounts, noting it was 45 minutes before she could see anything. "I would look up out my window and there would be these big fireballs that would come and hit the pickup."

Roger and Jenny stayed on the phone with her, Roger reassuring her she was safe on the wheat field and Jenny praying with her that she'd see her babies again.

"We prayed a lot," she says emphatically. "Finally, the smoke cleared, and I could get over to a bigger wheat field, and then my aunt and uncle were able to come in from the other side and lead me out." They headed to the YB to find C.J. and Laura.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 52

► **Below:** Fueled by high winds and an abundance of dry grass, when the winds shifted, the fire gave little time to move cattle to the safety of wheat fields.



PHOTO BY MOLLY GILES-BECKFORD



PHOTO BY KATIE SHAW

► **Left:** Close calls by so many in her family and the community put their other losses into perspective, says Katie Shaw, who had a narrow escape herself. "We can build more houses, we can buy more things, but you can't replace people."

► **Right:** Rancher David Bouziden waited the fire out in a wheat field south of his house. Seeing more than one fire tornado, he says he was impressed by one that threw fire and sparks. "It was like Armageddon," he says.



PHOTO BY SHELBY METTLER

A different sort of spring break

High school students use the week to help Clark County ranchers pick up the pieces after wildfire.

Spring break is a celebrated occasion for students across the United States. It's a week to relax, unwind and prepare for the wave of final exams to take place in the next couple of months. Some head home to share their time with family, some hit the beach, and others pack up their boots, gloves and fencing equipment and head to fire-stricken southwestern Kansas to help ranchers rebuild.

Six high school students and two parents from Labette County, Kan., donated their spring breaks to help ranchers near Ashland, Kan., after the March 6 wildfires that devastated the area. Megan and Kylie March; Micah Day and his father, Jon; sisters Shyanne and Cloey Jones and their mother, Teresa; and Kayleigh Wilson made good use of their "vacation" this year.

Group effort

Shyanne Jones of Mound Valley, Kan., saw a post about the wildfires on Facebook. After mentioning it to her mom and exchanging a few text messages with friends, a decision was made and a group was formed. The students are friends from church and members of Labette County FFA.

"I think we really need to do this, because God put it on our hearts," Shyanne told her mom, Teresa, after reading the post. The crew piled into Teresa's pickup and Jon's van and headed for Clark County.

Gain, despite loss

The group focused their efforts on the Giles family of Ashland, Kan. Sisters Jenny (Giles) Betschart, Molly Giles-Beckford and Katie (Giles) Shaw and their families lost their homes in the fire. The only houses remaining are their parents' home, and a small house on the property they use for visitors.

"God knew we needed someplace to stay, I think," Jenny quips.

Surrounding towns were evacuated on March 6 due to the blaze, so the sisters stayed overnight in a neighboring town and returned the next morning.

"When we showed up, there were already people here with four-wheelers, hay. Everybody was wanting to help," Molly recalls. "We were still in shock of seeing everything. It took half the day probably just to try to wrap our heads around what happened and what needed to be done."

Jenny estimates between 50 and 75 volunteers showed up right away, but Molly admits she can't recall how many pitched in the first few days following the fire.

"We just could not have done it — we would still be doing it — if it weren't for the people that came in," Molly says. "It's just, it's amazing."

Finding homes

According to Jenny and Molly, the ranch suffered a significant loss of their cow herd — an estimated 60%-65% of their cattle perished.

In the midst of spring calving, the sisters soon had another problem with the survivors. Many of the cows calving after the fire had udders too badly burned to nurse, leaving many young calves without mothers.

A nearby calf farm picked up 11 calves the day after the fire and sent Jenny photos of the little ones in their new huts. Six more are being bottle-fed by the sisters with more expected to come in the following days.

Teresa agreed to make a home for two of the calves. Her 9-year-old son, Brody, will raise them as bucket calves, show them at the county fair, then return them to Giles Ranch.

Teresa told Jenny, "We went and got a dog crate in Dodge [City] last night. If the offer's still open, we'll take some, but we're going to bring them back."

The young volunteers worked through 30-40 mph wind gusts the first day they arrived, Molly says. They fenced all afternoon through that, with no complaints and smiles on their faces. And they came back the next day.

It's been overwhelmingly heartening to watch strangers, particularly young people like the group from Labette County, donate their time and open their hearts to families like the Giles family.

"When you're on social media or on the news, you hear all that's wrong with the world and especially all that's wrong with the younger generation," Jenny says. "They embody all that's right."

"We as a family, the Giles family, cannot wait to be able to pay this forward," she continues, "and now we will look at natural disasters in a whole new light. It's one thing to send money and hay donations; it's another thing to show up and get dirty and help people."

Paying it forward

This group of youth is just one example of many young people traveling to Ashland and the surrounding area to help with fire relief efforts. Volunteers, young and old, have made their way from every corner of the country to help the area rebuild.

"I think it shows there's actual good in America," Megan March says. "That's what we need to be."

"I think it's great," Micah Day says, simply. "If something like this

happened back at our place, they would do just as much or even more," he says.

Day's father, Jon, Altamont, Kan., rode along on the trip "to fulfill the words of Jesus, who said, 'Do unto others as you would have them do to you,'" he says.

Teresa says the young volunteers enjoyed helping the Giles family out over the course of the week.

"They're just an amazing group of people who have been to hell and back, and they're still on their feet," she says. "They're always in our prayers."

"I think the ripple effect this will have in the Midwest will be felt for years to come," Jenny says. "So many people have been touched by the generosity and kindness of strangers that can't wait to go out and do more."

— by *Shelby Mettlen*, assistant editor



PHOTO BY SHELBY METTLEN

► Labette County youth Micah Day and Megan March bottle-feed a calf at Giles Ranch. "When you're on social media or on the news, you hear all that's wrong with the world and especially all that's wrong with the younger generation," says Jenny Betschart. "They embody all that's right."

By the time other family members reached Protection, it was being evacuated, so they regrouped in Coldwater. Jenny's husband, Shane Betschart, who ranches with his dad south of Ashland, had gone by their house and gotten their horses, dog and two bucket calves. His cousin brought their two oldest children, who had been in school in Ashland, to be with their parents.

About 5 o'clock, they tried to go back to the ranch, getting caught in a second round of fire, and had to seek safety in a wheat field.

"We weren't in any danger on the wheat field, but we were surrounded by fire," Jenny says, noting they were there about an hour when neighbor Travis Price of Bucklin came in from the north, behind the fire, and led them out.

Inventorying the damage

"We got off easy," emphasizes Cunningham, who says his family had time to push the cattle to the wheat field. Besides 8,000 acres of grass, they lost two cows and maybe five or six baby calves.

"We saved our cows. We have a place to take them. We have a home," he says. Others weren't as fortunate.

— Bouziden Ranch —

Still standing after the fire burned through, Bouziden's house caught fire as crews focused on saving one of the sheds. Once started, fire trucks at the scene couldn't put out the blaze. Three shops, a hay shed, several pieces of equipment and vehicles were also consumed.

"It burned every stitch of grass — from the north end all the way to our south end, ... 12,000 to 13,000 acres," says Kit Walker, Bouziden's stepson and partner in Bouziden-Walker Farms. Miles of fence will need to be repaired or replaced.

Two hundred twenty-six spring-calving cows were calving on grass stockpiled for just that purpose, Walker notes. "We were able to save two baby calves, which we are bottle-feeding. They're kind of our mascots now for the rebuilding process."

Sixty-two of 83 home-raised heifers, 93 fall-calving cows grazing wheat and the two mascots remain of the commercial Angus herd they started five years ago and were trying to build to 500-600 head.

— Gardiner Angus Ranch —

As the remnants of 6,800 large round bales smoldered, the Gardiners found most of the cattle in the pens close to the house made it through. Only 15, located in the west circle (see aerial photo, see page 48) closest to the windbreak, were lost.

The fire blew through the bull development facility a mile away from the house, but the cattle — penned in the dirt lots surrounded by gravel alleys, metal fences and concrete feedbunks — weren't harmed by the flames, nor was the marketing center they had opened the year prior.

However, as Mark and Eva, a veterinarian, drove through each pasture the next day, they got a sobering picture. Of 200 bred cows down on the river, says Mark,

90% perished. Of 400 spring-calving cows, they lost 250. All tallied, the final count was more than 550 head.

"It was just so big and so fast," he says. "You wonder why they couldn't get away, but then you see all these dead coyotes and dead jackrabbits and deer. A cow doesn't run that fast."

They rode pastures for two and a half days, euthanizing cows that survived the fire, but were too injured to make it. Those they thought might, they brought to the sale barn to pamper.

"I told [the crew], if they can eat and drink, let's let them tell us," Mark says.

In addition to the cattle, the hay, and Mark and Eva's house, the fire claimed all but a half section of the ranch's 42,000 acres of grass and the fence that goes with it, Mark calculates. "We've got 270 miles of fence to rebuild."

— Giles Ranch —

"It was a night we will never forget. It was pretty horrific," says Jenny Betschart.

"Coming out the next day was the hardest."

All three girls had lost their homes, and the ranch office had burned. Neighbors were able to turn on sprinklers at their parents' house, and it was spared, as was a fifth house used when extended family and guests visit.

"Only the grace of God saved it," says Molly, explaining that the fire had burned right up to the house and even melted the siding.

"Losing our home was horrible," says



► "The whole community is going to suffer. It's not just the ranchers," says Kit Walker, who had returned to the community to raise his family after spending time out west as a helicopter pilot. "The ranchers may have been hardest hit, but it is going to affect everybody, and it's going to trickle down. It will affect the whole community."



► After checking in at the Ashland Feed & Seed, a convoy of trucks loaded with hay heads south of Ashland to local ranchers.

Jenny, “but the worst part was the animals. ... It took us four days before we had everything put down and a week before we had everything buried.”

Starting with 1,000 cows, the initial blow claimed nearly 50% of the herd. Like the other ranches, they were in the midst of spring calving. In the weeks following the fire, the sisters had to keep close watch on those calving, as many had udders too badly burned to nurse and needed to be culled, leaving behind a pen of bawling orphans.

“When it is all said and done, we will have lost 60% to 65% of our herd,” Jenny says.

A representative sample

These experiences provide a mere glimpse of the effects of the wildfires that broke out March 6 and 7. In Clark County — home to Bouziden, Walker, Giles and Gardiner — the fire claimed 40 homes and nearly 470,000 of its 625,000 acres. Countywide, estimates say the fire killed 6,000-10,000 head of cattle and destroyed \$41 million worth of fence.

A USDA news release announcing emergency grazing on Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) acres estimated more than 1.5 million acres burned in Texas, Oklahoma and Kansas, with cattle losses of as many as 15,000 head (see “Beef Business,” page 128).

While those statistics describe the magnitude of the destruction and loss, they are overshadowed by the human response

witnessed in the relief efforts mounted by the community itself and the ag community at large.

Ready hands

Many of the ranchers affected by the fire get emotional as they describe the assistance of the veterinarians at the Ashland Veterinary Clinic. Randall Spare coordinated emergency efforts out of the clinic, which became a “mission control center” for fire relief efforts, while John Kellenberger spearheaded efforts in the field.

The community put together a task force to assess needs, apply for disaster assistance and organize support for those in need. Spare and Gardiner participated on the task force, along with Ashland’s mayor, Kendal Kay, and 30-35 others from the community. Reaching out to those affected to ascertain their needs was a first priority. By all accounts, the community rallied to help their neighbors. And as word of the fires spread via social media, the ag community at large took action (see “It takes a village,” page 49).

Cowboys showed up Tuesday morning at the Giles Ranch ready to ride, shares Molly. Some they knew; others they met. All made the task of gathering and dealing with the fire’s aftermath not just possible, but a renewal of their spirit.

“The volunteers that came right away, we couldn’t have done it without them,” says Jenny, noting they had as many as 50-75 people per day on hand to help. “They

didn’t know us, but they wanted to help, and they brought their loaders out and helped bury — just all sorts of acts of kindness coming in right away. We couldn’t have done this without them.”

“People have been wonderful,” agrees Mark Gardiner, sharing how friend and partner Donnell Brown of R.A. Brown Ranch, Throckmorton, Texas, showed up at 3 a.m. at the Dunne Ranch where Mark and Eva were fighting fire asking what he could do. As temperatures had dropped to 25° F, Mark shared he could use a coat and a hat.

“So he gave me a coat and a hat,” Mark says. Two weeks later, Mark was still wearing the hat.

“People have been amazing. They came running the next morning, and they are still here,” says Mark. “On one hand you have the truck drivers and you see the hay coming into the drop offs at Ashland, Englewood and our place (a designated drop off). It’s spring break, so most of the high school kids spent the week tearing out fence and cleaning out junk.”

The K-State Collegiate Cattlewomen brought a group, friends and colleagues from the university and customers from across the country called or came in person to ask what they could do.

Kelli Brown, Donnell’s wife, organized a freezer ministry, taking donations to buy five freezers and the food to fill them. Donor names were taped to each meal to let those

CONTINUED ON PAGE 54

PHOTOS BY SHELBY WETTLEN



►Shanell Shoop (pictured) of Inola, Okla., and friend Cheyenne Morgan of Choteau, Okla., came to Ashland to volunteer their weekend. They spent the afternoon clipping barbed wire to fence posts for a rancher they had never met.



►Members of the Cass-Morgan Farm Bureau Young Leaders in Jacksonville, Ill., travelled to Ashland to deliver hay and other supplies. “I’m a firm believer that in agriculture we’re all in this together,” says 23-year-old instigator Evan Marr.

who had lost their homes know they were in somebody's prayers.

Fellow Angus breeder Matt Perrier of Dalebanks Angus, Eureka, Kan., pulled horse and trailer to the site and helped ride pastures, sharing the experience on Facebook.

In several instances, a call to fill out a load resulted in a convoy of volunteers hauling semi-loads of everything from toilet paper to fencing supplies.

While the veterinary clinic originally served as a command center and central drop-off location, donations soon outgrew the space. Ashland Feed & Seed Co., operated by Neil Kay, his son Jeff Kay and daughter Janell Smitt, took on the role of a central drop off for Ashland. Shared by phone, task force volunteers coordinated a list of individual needs, whether they be labor or materials. As donations came in and volunteers arrived, they were able to match the gift with the need.

The task force also broadened the Ashland Community Foundation to include the Ashland Community Fire Relief Fund. When asked what people could do if they still wanted to help, the Clark County residents all recommended contributing to the fund, which makes the donation tax-deductible. Further explanation is available by scrolling down on the welcome page at www.ashlandcf.org, but those who have incurred loss can fill out a fire relief application (due June 1, 2017). Funds will be distributed according to need by Aug. 1, 2017.

Grateful hearts, positive outlooks

For the ranchers put to the fire, the experience bolstered their faith and strengthened their resolve to build back.

Having so many close calls to losing family members adds perspective and reason for thanks, says Katie Shaw. "We can build back our numbers. We can get more cattle. We can build the ranch back. We can build more houses, we can buy more things, but you can't replace people."

Her sister Molly says the experience has changed how she will look at natural disasters in the future.

"The whole first day we didn't even know what to do," she explains. "You couldn't wrap your mind around what had happened and what needed to be done, but people just started showing up. They brought equipment. They started bringing hay right away, and just started doing things. ... It is amazing all of the help we have received and just the love that we have gotten from all over the country."

"As devastating as this fire was, it kind of restored my faith in humanity," says Cunningham. "The outpouring of support, hay, supplies, help in general ... has just been breathtaking. Maybe more important than that are the people who called and said they were praying for us. I think that's been better for us than anything."

"We've just been strengthened by the prayers of others, the voices of friends from afar and those coming to help," says Eva Gardiner. "That's carrying us through, and it's just an amazing experience."

"The word gets overused, but it's been humbling how good people are," says Mark. "Like I've told my family and others, if you can't see God in all of this, you can't see."

▲



▶ "The community itself could not have taken care of itself without all of the outside help that came in," emphasizes Jenny Betschart.





► Chuckwagon cooks Jack Boyd (left) of Lubbock, Texas, and Rusty Chandler of Stephenville, Texas, brought a trailer load of donated food and supplies and spent a week at Gardiner Angus Ranch cooking three meals a day for volunteers and ranch hands.

Rural America Rises

The Angus Report offers a three-part companion series.

by Jena McReil, digital editor & Dale Heikes, videographer

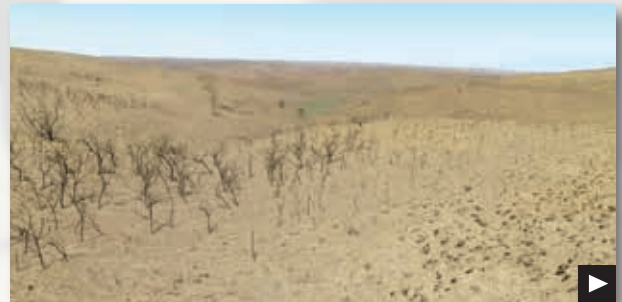


Gardiner Angus Ranch Recounts Wildfire

Up from the ashes of the March 6 wildfires come inspired stories of strength and hope.

Mark and Eva Gardiner, Gardiner Angus Ranch near Ashland, Kan., share what they've experienced and how rural neighbors, near and far, have contributed to recovery efforts.

Link: https://youtu.be/ykqMcf1F_sU.

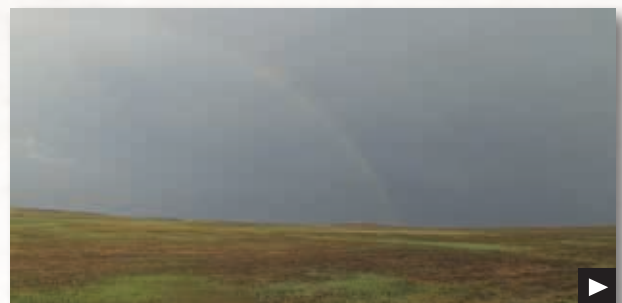


Overcoming Tragedy at the Giles Ranch

The wildfires have left a painful mark on the land, the livestock and the families who care for them.

On the Giles Ranch in southwest Kansas, three sisters lost their homes and 60% of their family's beef herd. After unthinkable loss, they're grateful for each other and the incredible outpouring of support.

Link: <https://youtu.be/EsnJwst80tU>.



When Disaster Strikes, Ag Responds

If there are neighbors in need, rural America doesn't wait.

Fires were still lingering as a convoy of donations and workers made their way to the burned regions in Kansas, Oklahoma, Colorado and Texas. Hundreds of volunteers have provided invaluable support, and prayers, to inspire the rebuilding process.

Visit www.angus.org to watch the three-part series from *The Angus Report*.



► Rains received two and three weeks after the fire were also a form of relief to area ranchers, who hoped to be back on pastures with tighter soils by late summer to fall. Pastures where the soil is more "blow sand" will have to be pampered for a couple of years before stocking rates can return to normal.