

# Wildfire

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a way to help others," said Kay, who also is president of the Stockgrowers State Bank in Ashland.

That is what living in a close-knit community in rural America is all about, he said.

This is Clark County, Kansas, where the rugged Red Hills prairie were singed down to the bare earth. In fact, the county looks like a battleground. Burned pastures line about every county road here, along with destroyed fences, homes and dead cattle.

The fire that burned more than 500,000 acres across three counties – surpassing last year's Anderson Creek Fire – makes it the worst wildfire in Kansas history. In Clark County alone, the fires burned more than 400,000 acres.

Yet through the devastation, the county of just 2,200 – residents are lifting each other up and lending their hands. And no one has given up the fight.

"There is hope," said Kay. "I haven't heard one time this week that we are done. This is going to be a major hurdle to overcome, but we will build back stronger than ever – and there has not been one hint of thinking otherwise."

### Largest fire in state history

Go back a year ago this month and no one in the state had experienced anything as bad as Anderson Creek. The fire spread across roughly 400,000 acres in Barber and Comanche counties – damaging homes, cattle and fence lines in its path.

It was called the largest fire in Kansas' history.

Not that anyone wanted to ever surpass that record, said rancher Greg Gardiner. "You don't want to get into a measuring stick but this is bigger than that one," he said. "There are 625,000 acres in Clark County and 430,000 so far have been burned up."

Allison Kuhns, the county attorney who also is serving as the fire spokeswoman, said at last update, 625 square miles of Clark County had burned – or roughly two-thirds of the county.

"It is significant," she said. The fire moved into the county just after noon Monday. On Thursday, the county was still working six active fires.

"At this point we are not dealing with any active fires," she said on Friday. "We are dealing with hot spots."

A Clark County deputy sheriff Thursday parked at the top of a rise, watching into the valley for anything burning.

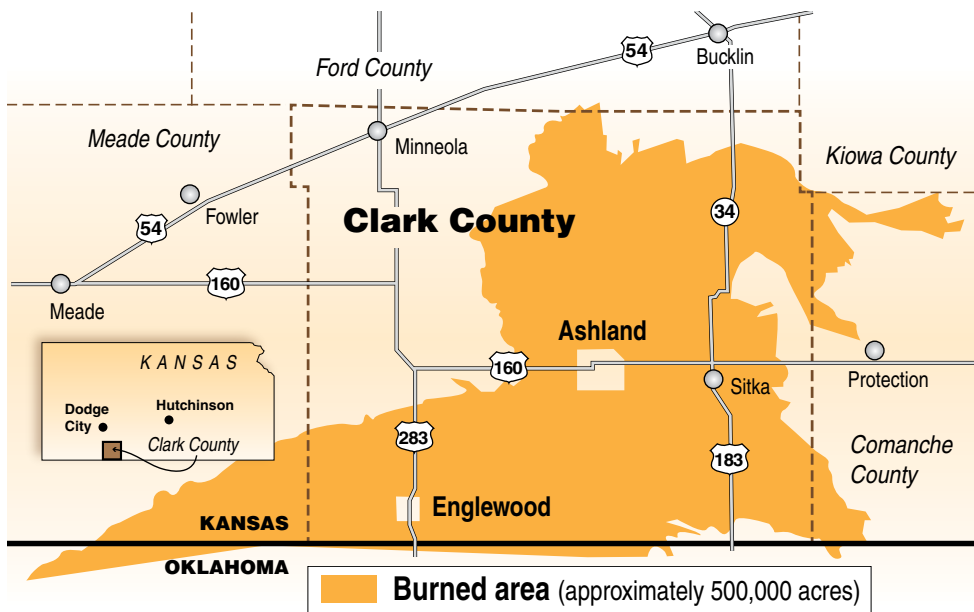
He said the fires have taken a toll on everyone – but all have pitched in to help. He recalled a heroic moment from a wildlife official, who answered the call to save fire sight-seers at Clark County State Lake.

As of Friday, 34 buildings and 20 homes have been lost, Kuhns said. Eight of the homes were in Englewood – a town of about 75 people.

Somehow, the fires missed Ashland. It got within a half-mile on almost all sides of town.

"How Ashland is still standing – two reasons," said Kay. "An outstanding fire department and the grace of God."

**Working with ranches**  
Veterinarian Randall Spare's son showed up from



Source: Kansas Division of Emergency Management

Jim Heck/The Hutchinson News

## HELP FOR RENO COUNTY WILDFIRES

**What:** Multi Agency Resource Center, providing recovery resources for people affected by Reno County wildfires.

**When:** 1 to 6 p.m. Sunday.

**Where:** The Encampment Building on the Kansas State Fairgrounds in Hutchinson.

veterinary school at 3 a.m. with a friend to help with the fight. His daughter came home from nursing school to help man the phones.

Spare lost his own cattle in the fire – about 40 to 45 head of cows. But the miracles continue, he added.

"I'm very fortunate and it will be OK," he said. "Some farmer drove through and saved my house, disked all around my house and saved it by 100 yards."

Others, however, lost homes. Rancher Mark Gardiner lost 500 head of cattle and his home on his family's ranch. Rancher Dave Bouziden lost 99 percent of his cattle, said Spare.

"He lost all but 13 adult cows," he said. "His cattle on wheat were safe, but he lost his adult cow herd."

Those are just a few stories, Spare added.

He doesn't want to appear too low or be too much of an alarmist, he said. But he estimates anywhere from 3,000 to 9,000 head of adult cattle died from the fire.

"And that doesn't count all the baby calves," he said.

About 750 to 800 cattle died in the Anderson Creek Fire, along with an estimated 2,700 miles of fence, according to Barber County Emergency Management.

With the fires now under control, Spare said part of his staff is staying in the office to deal with individual problems while others are heading to ranches to help with euthanasia and health issues. Veterinarians have helped – some coming from Kansas State University. Others have donated funds. He's been on the phone coordinating hay and supplies, as well as dealing with the state and livestock burial issues.

The emotional toll is high, Spare said. He recently called on a rancher asking how he was getting along. He told him fine – he had two loads of hay.

That would cover just eight days of feeding what cattle he had left, Spare said. The rancher began to sob.

He and Kay also have been working to contact lawmakers on funding.

Most had property insurance, said Kay. However, like many Kansas ranchers, most didn't have insurance on their cattle.

The federal government's livestock assistance program is capped at \$125,000. Fencing costs is capped at \$200,000.

"It's a drop in the bucket compared to what we are dealing with," said Kay, adding he talked with Sen. Pat Roberts, R-Kansas, on Friday about the issue. Roberts toured the wildfire area that day. "I am hopeful they will consider increasing it."

After all, Kay said, "Tens

of millions of dollars have been lost."

It costs \$10,000 to build a mile a fence, said Spare.

"I just had one ranch request 80 miles of fence material," Spare said. "That is a million dollars in fence."

Kay said the Stockgrowers bank has been supporting cattle ranchers since it first opened in 1885. There have been challenges over the years, and the wildfire might be the biggest one to overcome. But as a community bank, he is backing his customers in good times and bad.

Ranching, after all, is the backbone of this community, he said.

"I don't care where you turn," Kay added. "The stress level is off the radar."

### Supplies

Some folks have fought the fires. Some are fighting it with food – manning the school cafeteria where dinners are served for the community every day, said Kuhns.

But across the state, help is coming, as well. Spare, along with Jeff Kay, who operates his family business – Ashland Feed and Seed – have been coordinating relief efforts in the form of donations.

Jeff Kay, who is Kendal's brother, said they still need hay, fencing supplies and other items for the ranching community. Some have donated milk replacer; others bottles to feed calves.

"We need hay, fencing, rain and a lot of prayers," he said.

The outpouring so far has been a blessing, he said.

"We are a small rural community here absolute devastated," Jeff Kay said. "But you are seeing the farming small communities come together and we are here for each other."

He too, finds it amazing Ashland is still standing, noting the gusts of up to 70 mph that blew in, blasting sand and smoke and making it difficult to see. Owing the family business, he didn't evacuate with the other residents, instead working to stave off the fire.

"I have 50 employees that want to have jobs tomorrow," Kay said. "I wasn't leaving. I was out here with a wet gunny sack like back in the old days."

Now, he and others are asking for help.

"We are 60 miles from a Walmart store," Kay said. "We are out here in the middle of nowhere. We always thought we could survive anything and everything, but this time we need help and are asking for help."

"This is not an overnight fix," he said. "We need

Mother Nature to come see us real bad. If it rains it could be a whole lot simpler problem."

### KDHE HELP FOR FARMERS, RANCHERS

The Kansas Department of Health and Environment encourages farmers and ranchers who have lost livestock in the ongoing wildfires to contact the agency for assistance with disposing of dead livestock.

KDHE's Bureau of Waste Management helps determine the safest and most effective means of livestock disposal. The agency works with the Kansas Department of Agriculture to help with disposal, including selecting and permitting locations for those who wish to bury dead livestock on-site.

Farmers and ranchers who have lost livestock in the fires should contact Ken Powell, Compliance and Enforcement, Waste Reduction and Assistance Section Chief for the Bureau of Waste Management, at (785) 296-1121 or Ken.Powell@ks.gov.

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Lindsey Bauman/Staff photographer

**A helicopter flies in low above the Cimarron River on Thursday near Ashland. Helicopters have been conducting water-drop operations in fighting the wildfires that started Monday.**