

Cattle

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might survive, said Greg. Those they bring to pens at the ranch headquarters so they can monitor them. Meanwhile, most of the cattle that were ready for the family's April seedstock sale are all safe – placed in the pens near the family's sale barn.

But those that survived the fire are few – the future production cycle that will put a hole in the Gardiner system in 2019. Greg pointed to a nearby pen of cattle.

"They gathered these off the Cimarron River the past two days," he said. "They came out of a group of 300. There might be 20 left."

A damage

Greg stopped the pickup near a fence where several head of dead bloated cattle appeared to try to get out of the fire's way. However, it was apparent that even those that broke through the fence didn't have anywhere to go.

Not far away a deer roams slowly across the scorched pasture – unaware anyone is watching.

"It's blind," Greg said. He crossed the Cimarron River, just 3 miles from the Oklahoma state line.

"We shot these cattle yesterday," he said as he pointed to a few dead cows in the river bed. "There is more underneath the bridge. Up and down the river, that is what we are finding."

They had 5,000 round bales of hay scattered around the ranch – just to protect it from such a disaster. Nothing remains.

There are fences to repair. There could be federal assistance for fences and cattle – but with a funding cap, those programs don't come near to covering the losses, which are in the millions.

"We can't wait on government assistance, we have to go ahead and rebuild," he said.

But there are success stories, he said as he drove down a road that borders the ranch.

"There were guys standing here that put the fire out here by hand with gunny sacks," Greg said. "They were trying to keep it away from this house over



A dead cow lies next to the Cimarron River at Gardiner Angus Ranch on Thursday in Ashland. The ranch sustained heavy cattle losses in Monday's wildfires.

Photos by Lindsey Bauman/Staff photographer

here where our interns live. During the night – they held this."

The fire also killed the invasive salt cedar, which lined the creeks and sucked up 300 to 500 gallons of water a day.

And the outpouring of help is a blessing, he said of the joy of seeing the cattle trucks with donated hay coming down the highway – the cavalry, as he calls it. Moreover, there are signs of rebirth – even just days after the fire. Green grass is budding up above the sand. He knows how other wild-fire areas have come back lush with rain. He prays for a shower.

"The fire is pretty cleansing and it reveals a lot," Greg said. "It reveals not only the land but your raw emotions. It also reveals the goodness of people and mankind."

One miracle happened Tuesday, when another round of fires blew through.

Greg saw a wall of smoke and the neighbor's steers pouring out of the smoke near the ranch.

"They saw me over on the road," he said. "I honked my horn at the steers and they knew someone might feed them. So they came out of the smoke to me and I was able to open a gate right across the road. There was another open gate and I was able to drag them out across to another wheat pasture where they started grazing."

Then he broke down. "It was so nice to be able

to save something," he said.

Counting their blessings
Mark Gardiner, who was counting dead cattle on Thursday, said people have been amazing – calling, texting and offering to help.

For a cowboy like Mark, it's tough to take a handout.

"We're not good at accepting help," he said. "But I told everyone we are going to have to and people have been pretty amazing. Thank you is all we can say."

He and his wife lost their home. They lost their two dogs. But they still have their family, he said.

"The house is the lowest thing that matters," he said. "It is just a building. We can replace that."

"We have our memories there. We have our family," Mark said. "Nobody got hurt. That is what matters."

It is how they all felt as they watched the house burn that night after the fires moved through – Mark, Eva and Greg.

"We stood there as a

family and watched his house burn to the ground," Greg said. "And for us, it didn't mean anything because Mark and Eva are alive. And we were all three there together."

Greg pulled into the same wheat field where he had taken refuge Monday – that wheat field where he waited for the news of Mark and Eva. For two days, he felt the guilt of it all.

"I always tried to conduct myself to ride toward the sound of the guns and go to battle and if the fight is there the fight is there," he said. "I felt so ashamed that I abandoned them – that I turned and I ran."

Then God sent a good friend to visit him on Wednesday, he said. "God is the one that got you out of the way so Mark and Eva could get through," his friend told him.

Greg had found out later that Eva, who couldn't rouse the dogs, left right after him. She eventually found the wheat field,

GARDINER ANGUS RANCH SPRING PRODUCTION SALE

The 38th annual production sale at Gardiner Angus Ranch will go on. The sale begins at 9 a.m. at the ranch's Henry & Nan Gardiner Marketing Center near Ashland. For more information, visit www.gardinerangus.com.

not knowing where her husband was. Mark never made it to the barn, instead turning back to the house – trying to coax the dogs out, but they wouldn't come. When Mark realized through the smoke that Eva and Greg's vehicles were gone, he left too – just in time.

A few hours later, Greg and Mark finally connected – Mark was back by his house, spraying down the barn, which, along with the horses, survived. "Because of my self preservation that kicked in and God's help, I know that is truly what He was doing – to get me out of the road so they could come out," Greg said. Otherwise,

"They wouldn't have seen the truck, the truck would have blocked the exit, and we would have all died there."

A weight has been lifted off his shoulders, he said. It is heartbreaking to see the land burned, the cattle dead they had nurtured and his brother's house destroyed.

"But everything you've seen today is piddling," he said. "With Mark and Eva being alive, everything else is inconsequential."

"He is my very best friend in life," Greg said of Mark. "I can't lose him. Until it is our time to walk away from it, I can't do this without him."



DELOS V. SMITH SENIOR CITIZENS FOUNDATION & CENTER

ESTHER OF THE BIBLE

Thursday, March 16, 2017 at 3:30 p.m.
The Delos V. Smith Senior Center - 101 W. 1st Ave

Have you ever wondered why you are here? If you're alive and breathing, YOU have a purpose!
Nothing in your life is by accident...

"You have come to the kingdom for such a time as this" - Esther 4:14

Come here Natalee Ganyon enact the story of Esther in first person.



Greg Gardiner surveys a group of registered replacement heifers for injured animals at Gardiner Angus Ranch on Thursday. It was the first time Gardiner had seen the group since Monday's wildfire, finding a handful of dead animals and a few injured with burns. Most took refuge on a field of green wheat.

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*Discounts provided every day; marked prices reflect general U.S. market value for similar products.

HOW TO HELP

Organizers in Clark County are calling for help by the way of hay, fencing and other needs.

"Everyone has chipped in to do their part," Kay said. All these small communities come together in times like these," said Kendal Kay, president of the Stockgrowers Bank. "There is no way to prepare for a disaster like this – it is impossible. But I'm very proud of how everyone has come together to do what they can to support each other."

Those wanting to donate can visit www.ClarkCountyProud.com to see what the needs are and where to donate.

At present, Ashland Feed and Seed and Ashland Vet Center are coordinating hay and other supplies. To contact Jeff Kay, with the feed mill, call him at (620) 635-0072.

The Kansas Livestock Association is accepting donations of feed, fencing supplies and cash for the ranchers who've lost fencing, forage resources, harvested feed and an undetermined number of cattle in the blazes.

Donations may be made by contacting the association, with cash contributions payout through the Kansas Livestock Foundation, the association's charitable arm.

Other monetary gifts can be made to the Ashland Community Foundation. Visit www.ashlandcf.com.

BUSINESS Financial & farm news

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