

Wildfire Response in Range Cattle



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KEYWORDS

• Wildfire • Disaster relief • Range cattle

KEY POINTS

- Assessing the welfare of surviving cattle, disposal of cattle lost in the fire, and support of the affected ranchers are the critical priorities after a wildfire.
- After a wildfire, cattle are typically sorted into 3 categories: cattle that succumbed in the fire, cattle that are beyond function (burned feet, burned udders, burned eyes, and severely singed hair), and cattle that appear to be unharmed.
- As a rule, ranchers are stewards of the resources that have been entrusted to their care, whether it is land, grass, or cattle. Although some ranchers are able to euthanize their own cattle in these situations, there are some who seek out veterinary assistance.

Wildfires in areas of the Great Plains during March of 2016 and 2017 left scars that will be seen and felt for years. The March 23, 2016, Anderson Creek fire burned nearly 400,000 acres in Barber and Comanche counties in south central Kansas and Woods county in north-central Oklahoma, killing approximately 600 head of cattle and destroying several hundred miles of fence. Although there were 16 homes burned in this fire and 25 other structures were destroyed, there was no loss of human life. At least 6 separate fires occurred on March 6, 2017, burning an estimated 1.2 million acres in southwest Kansas, the Oklahoma panhandle, and the Texas panhandle. The largest of these, the Starbuck fire, burned over 715,000 acres in Clark, Comanche, and Meade counties in Kansas, as well as in Beaver county Oklahoma. The Selman fire burned more than 47,000 acres in Harper and Woodward counties in Oklahoma and the 283 fire burned and additional 71,000 acres in Harper county Oklahoma. The Perryton fire burned 315,000 acres in Ochiltree, Lipscomb, and Hemphill counties in Texas, and the Lefors East fire burned 92,500 acres in Gray county Texas and the Dumas Complex fire burned more than 29,000 acres in Potter county Texas. Five people lost their lives in these fires, 1 in Kansas when a truck driver drove into the fire and 4 in the Texas panhandle while moving cattle out of the path of the fire. The Starbuck fire

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was responsible for the loss of nearly 4000 cows and 4000 calves, in addition to approximately 4100 miles of fence and 30 homes. The manner in which the producers and communities affected by the Starbuck fire dealt with the aftermath and recovery from this natural disaster is the focus of this article.

THE IMMEDIATE NEED

Assessing the welfare of the surviving cattle, disposal of the cattle lost in the fire, and support of the affected ranchers were the critical priorities as the fire burned out. The plentiful, dormant grass that was available for grazing before March 6 was completely burned in the fire. Wheat pasture was available for grazing but not enough for the number of cows involved. Much of the baled forage that was to be fed before grass greenup was destroyed in the fire. Those ranches that had baled hay after the fire did not have enough to feed the entire herd.

Ranchers are a very self-sufficient group who are much more adept at helping others than accepting help while enduring hardship. Yet, in the nearly overwhelming aftermath of the Starbuck fire, the affected ranchers soon realized that they did need help. The fire was not completely out before semi-trailer truck loads of donated hay were on the road headed to the area so that the surviving cows could be fed. People were calling, asking what their boots on the ground could do to help. Others did not call, rather, just showed up asking, "What can I do?" Others donated milk replacer for the surviving calves whose mothers succumbed in the fire. A veterinarian who works for a dairy calf ranch took calves and placed them in hutches at the calf ranch so they had shelter, milk replacer, and water. In an adjoining county, 4-H groups took in calves to care for so ranchers could focus on other needs.

With all of these needs being addressed simultaneously, in addition to the need to communicate with the Kansas Department of Health and Environment on disposal of dead cows, leadership and coordination was needed. The veterinarians of Ashland Veterinary Center made the decision early, the morning after the fire, that they would act as coordinators of the relief effort, in addition to going alongside their producer clients to assist them during these extenuating circumstances; essentially becoming command central for all things related to the area livestock. One veterinarian stayed at the clinic, answering phone calls, matching hay with ranchers in need, coordinating the effort to care for the surviving calves, talking to the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and directing assisting veterinarians to ranches who needed help assessing the aftermath. Another veterinarian from the clinic focused on assisting clients most affected by the fire, while others filled in as necessary. Later in the week after the fire, many of the command central duties were assigned to volunteers in the community to spread out the work load. These tasks included managing monetary donations, managing donations of fencing supplies, coordination of housing for volunteers, and providing meals for volunteers.

ASSESSMENT, EUTHANASIA, AND DISPOSAL

Three categories of cattle existed after the fire. First and most obvious were the cattle that succumbed in the fire that needed to be documented for insurance purposes or US Department of Agriculture (USDA) Livestock Indemnity Program (LIP) payments and then disposed of in a proper manner. The second group were cattle that were burned beyond function. This group included cows with burned feet, burned udders, burned eyes, and severely singed hair (Figs. 1–6). The top priority was to humanely euthanize these cows and dispose of them. The third group were cows that appeared to be unharmed.

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