

Flames Couldn't Break This Ranching Community

Rylee Glazier

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In western Oklahoma, the land bears fresh scars, not just on the cracked soil but in the hearts of ranchers who call it home. When the fierce wildfires swept across Roger Mills and Dewey counties this spring, families watched as decades of hard work and hope were taken by smoke and flames.

The Oklahoma Forestry Service recorded more than 24,000 acres scorched by fires earlier this spring. No strangers to wildfires for these counties, the latest blazes left fresh wounds and new lessons among those who rely on the land for their livelihoods.

“It’s a pretty sick feeling going to bed knowing you are 20 some cows short,” said Jason Brown, cattle producer and volunteer firefighter from Leedey, Oklahoma. “You do what you have to do, but it doesn’t make it any easier.”

Damaged fencing leaves cattle vulnerable to wandering into dangerous areas or onto highways, Brown added.

“The first thing producers do is make sure their livestock are protected and secured,” said County Executive Director for Roger Mills and Dewey County Farm Service Agency, Mindy Dowdle. “Many fences out here have wooden corners or posts, which are the first to burn and collapse.”

After protecting animals, producers must begin to assess damages, often still reeling the immediate shock, Dowdle said.

“People are in disbelief,” she said. “It can take a while for producers to truly process what happened, because the application process for aid requires detailed documentation of every loss.”

Common losses included fencing, hay supplies, pasture forage, and in a few cases, livestock. Fortunately, this particular fire resulted in few cattle deaths, Dowdle said.

The Farm Service Agency quickly activated disaster programs to help affected producers. Assistance includes cost-share programs for rebuilding fences, compensation for lost hay and livestock, and grazing loss payments.

“Our county office scheduled a producer meeting in Leedey to explain the options available,” Dowdle said. “We try to meet face-to-face and answer questions early, to help farmers avoid mistakes during the application process.”

Producers have 30 days to sign up for fencing assistance after the disaster meeting. The funds are awarded as reimbursement after ranchers complete their repairs, and the process can take months before final payments are made, Dowdle added.

There is coordination with groups like the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service to help connect farmers with donated hay and other resources.

“We don’t distribute the hay ourselves,” Dowdle said, “But we can point producers in the right direction when help is available.”

Neighbors often step in before formal aid arrives in these small towns, scattered across two counties, Brown said. Community members pitched in offering transportation, hay and support wherever they could, he added.

For ranchers like Alison Moore, the fire’s approach is sudden and terrifying, she added.

“My fiancé’s place was in the fires path,” Moore said. “The fire came within 10 feet of our house.”

Fortunately for Moore's family and livestock, they spared from direct losses, though the older fencing sustained damage.

"When you're young and just getting started, it's devastating to think everything you've worked for could be gone in minutes," Moore said. "It makes you appreciate your neighbors and community even more."

The emphasis on wildfire preparedness, including maintaining defensible space around homes and reducing cedar tree growth, remains to grow, Moore added.

"Cedars explode when they catch fire," Moore said. "Managing vegetation is one of the best ways to protect yourself."

Brown continues fighting the fire as both a firefighter and a rancher. The day started when he and fellow volunteers scrambled to save homes and livestock under terrible winds, he added.

"I saw the fire get closer and closer as I was trying to get there," Brown said. "When you realize it's already at your friends' houses, you just do what you can."

Brown lost about 1,600 acres of leased grazing land but recovered nearly all his cattle, he added.

"By some miracle, 26 cows walked out of the burnt ground without a singed hair," Brown said.

People continue calling all night, offering hay, Brown added. Hay donations came in from across the state, with donors often refusing compensation, Brown added.

"People were just thankful they could help," Brown said.

In the aftermath, producers focus on rebuilding fences, finding grazing for displaced cattle, and planning for the future, Dowdle said. Programs through FSA offer 75% reimbursement of fencing costs, but repairs take time, she added.

“Most of our wood corners are gone,” Brown said. “Even the fences that look good now could fail in a couple of years due to heat damage.”

Some producers opted to replace entire sections to avoid future problems, a costly but practical choice, Dowdle said.

“It’s not just about rebuilding,” Brown said. “It’s about being smarter for next time.”

Mentally and financially, Brown said, recovery becomes a careful balancing act.

“You have to realign your goals for the year,” he said. “You were maybe going to buy a new tractor, but now you’re just focused on rebuilding fences and keeping cattle fed.”

Fortunately, strong cattle markets in 2025 have a financial cushion, Brown added.

“If the market stays good, we’ll be ok,” Brown said. “If it were like the Rhea fire two to three years ago, it would be a lot harder.”

While wildfires left scars across the land, they also revealed the resilience and heart of western Oklahoma’s ranching communities, Dowdle said.

“There’s a light at the end of the tunnel, Brown said. “We’re thankful for everyone who helped, whether it was a load of hay or just a kind word.”

It becomes easy to get caught up in devastation, Moore added, but what you see unveils how much people care about each other, she said.

As for the future, Dowdle said producers can take away one important lesson: be prepared.

“Having a fire plan matters,” Dowdle said. “Managing your land to reduce fire risk matters. It’s about protecting your operation and your community.”

Out here on the plains, survival is not just about the land – it’s about the people who love it enough to stay and rebuild, again and again, Brown said.

Sources:

Mindy Dowdle – 580-309-0783

Alison Moore – 580-799-0061

Jason Brown – 580-884-8637