

# Disaster — Or opportunity to serve

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## Abstract

This presentation describes the worst natural disaster in the history of SW Kansas, a prairie wildfire that consumed 800,000 acres of grassland, homes, and livestock. The relief efforts were spectacular, with hay, fencing, cattle, and labor donations pouring in from across America. Veterinarians played a significant role in organizing relief efforts for the stricken community. It was truly an opportunity to serve, and the veterinarians' training and experience with problem solving was a significant asset to the relief effort.

**Key words:** practice management, disaster management, wildfires

## Résumé

Cette présentation décrit la pire catastrophe naturelle de l'histoire du sud-ouest du Kansas, un feu de prairie qui a détruit 800 000 acres de pâturage, des maisons et du bétail. Les secours humanitaires ont été spectaculaires avec des contributions de foin, de clôtures, de bovins et de main d'œuvre provenant de partout en Amérique. Les vétérinaires ont joué un rôle de premier plan en organisant les secours humanitaires pour la communauté accablée. Ce fût vraiment une opportunité de servir. L'expérience et la formation des vétérinaires dans la résolution de problèmes ont été des atouts majeurs pour le secours humanitaire.

Natural disasters such as floods, tornadoes, hurricanes, and wildfires occur daily throughout the world. We often think others will be affected, but not us. However, when these tragic events occur in our area to our friends or to us, it becomes intensely personal. Our quick response and involvement as veterinarians are important for the welfare of the animals and the people around us.

On March 6, 2017, Ashland, Kansas, which is in Clark County, was the epicenter of the largest wildfire in Kansas history. In less than 36 hours, 800,000 acres burned in Kansas and Oklahoma. In the Kansas counties of Meade, Clark, and Comanche, 509,000 acres burned. In Clark county alone, 426,000 of the 625,000 total acres were destroyed. As a veterinary clinic, we found ourselves at the forefront of serving those that had losses of livestock, pets, fences, hay, and homes.

Clark county is a rural county generating \$110 million annually in agricultural revenue, of which 85% is derived from livestock production. More than 85% of the land is

pasture land used for grazing. During February, March, and April, many of the spring calving cow herds are in the middle of calving. Cattle are often spread out over pastures up to several thousand acres in size. Clark County ranchers, like all ranchers, are stewards of natural resources of grass and water, and work diligently so that native grass is utilized during each phase of production. During the summer of 2016, the county experienced above-average rainfall to produce more than adequate forage for the winter months. January and February 2017 were unseasonably warm and dry. March began with extremely low humidity and high winds, creating optimal conditions for a wildfire.

March 6, 2017 was a normal work day for those of us at Ashland Veterinary Center. I was fertility testing bulls for the upcoming breeding season, leaving the clinic that morning at 6 am and travelling 2 hours southwest to Guymon, Oklahoma. I ignored the "red flag" warning issued by the National Weather Service, which indicated that conditions would be ideal for a grass fire. This was not an uncommon threat the past several weeks. Little did I know that before nightfall, this warning would become reality and the day would bring unprecedented challenges and unimaginable loss.

I received a text about noon, indicating a fire was located 35 miles southwest of Ashland. This fire, fueled by a strong southwest wind, put our community in harm's way. I gave little thought to the consequences of the fire until I received a text from the office about 3:30 pm, indicating that the fire was bearing down, and evacuation orders had been issued for the Ashland community. As I drove the 2 hours home, I soon realized that the fire from the southwest was picking up speed and rapidly advancing upon our community. Another fire was located 20 miles northwest of Ashland and rapidly moving east. About 4 pm, the wind that was blowing from the west-southwest at 50 to 70 MPH suddenly shifted to blowing from the north, and these long lines of fire were being pushed to the south. By now, the fires were completely out of control, burning 800 to 900 acres per minute fueled by high winds and ample dry grass. The initial fire scorched thousands of acres, killing many cows in its path. The lives of people were spared as they found refuge in wheat fields. The volunteer fire department was only able to save a few rural homes, and the community of Ashland was saved from the fire because a green wheat field created a wedge to push the fire past the outskirts of town.

As I reflect back on March 6, I am sure that I was numb to reality of the loss of property, loss of animals, and the suffering of those animals. As nightfall came upon us, I was limited to drive within a few miles of my home because of

the state of emergency. I knew the damage was unimaginable, as rings of fire circled our area. Knowing that my immediate family and the individuals of the Ashland Veterinary Center were safe, I was able to check on my neighbors' safety, since several had lost their homes.

The next morning, Tuesday, March 8, the veterinarians and staff of Ashland Veterinary Center gathered at 6 am to decide our role in the fire's aftermath. We knew from experiences from previous fires that we could come alongside producers to help them assess the conditions of their animals. Our consensus as a team was to take a leadership role, and we immediately reached out to those in the path of the fire. With the help of social media, we soon became a point of contact for relief efforts.

As a 4-person veterinary practice, we knew we had the resources and the ability to reach out and help those in need. My veterinary partner, Dr. John Kellenberger, contacted producers that had lost livestock and needed help assessing the living cattle. We then assisted in euthanasia for those animals that were suffering. My role was to stay at the clinic, calling individuals that might be affected by the fire but may not ask for help, and fielding calls from those that were offering hay, cattle, fence materials, and volunteer labor. Two of our veterinarians were busy helping with displaced pets and other animals. The staff of the veterinary clinic tirelessly gave of their time and energy serving those in our practice area.

On Tuesday, other veterinarians started reaching out to offer help. Several veterinarians from Kansas State University came to help in the assessment of cattle. They took personal time to assist us, but more importantly, they came alongside our producers. These veterinarians understood the importance of relationships and showed compassion to those that were suffering enormous losses. One technical service veterinarian came on 2 different occasions to help with assessment and euthanasia. A PhD candidate-veterinarian spent 5 days with us, inconspicuously performing any tasks that were needed around the clinic, serving clients each day.

The physical state of cattle was assigned to 1 of 3 assessment groups: those that died in the fire, those that escaped unharmed, and those that were harmed and needed to be euthanized or further evaluated to determine the progression of the damages. We always involved the owner in the animal welfare decisions, and euthanasia for every animal was ultimately the owner's decision. With the magnitude of death loss, it was sometimes difficult to kill an animal that was eating and appearing to be okay, yet the coronary band at the feet was separating and the toe caps were falling off. As the week progressed, more cattle exhibited signs of suffering. The most common signs were those that had severe hair loss, blindness, burned udders, and feet damaged at the coronary bands. At times, the feet pathology was not immediately evident. By the fifth or sixth day, animals whose feet were too hot during the fire had a separation of the coronary band.

Euthanizing the animals was emotionally taxing and physically wearing on those responsible for carrying out

the task. We did not have secure fences to hold the animals which would make euthanasia efficient. Often the cattle were spooked and blind. This process was made as humane as possible, due in part to the assistance of game wardens from the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks, who volunteered their time and skills without pay.

The disposal of the dead animals was a massive and time sensitive challenge. The Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE) understood the need to bury the carcasses immediately. KDHE issued reasonable restrictions that limited 100 carcasses in a pit. Disposal pits were to be covered by at least 3 feet of dirt, and ground water tables were to be avoided. We relayed the guidelines to anyone operating the equipment digging pits to bury cattle, and we contacted Dig Safe to avoid any underground utilities. The local county road and bridge crew assisted with covering large pits. The task of burying all deceased animals and covering the pits was completed in 5 days, which was an enormous undertaking by all involved. The timely disposal of more than 8,000 head relieved a public safety concern.

The day after the fire, we started directing loads of hay to livestock producers. At first, the livestock owners were unwilling to accept these gifts of hay. We had to work to convince them that it was okay, and we all began to learn how to be gracious recipients. The gifts of feed, fence, and money created accountability in the recipients to persevere, giving hope. Often, we simply listened to producers and encouraged them.

Within a few days we started receiving calls from people offering to bring cattle. This was far more personal and took a great deal of time to listen and sort out the desires of those offering cattle – matching the offers to those that could use the cattle. One individual offered to bring his entire calf crop, 100 head, to give to someone that had nothing left. Later in the summer as needs unfolded, we were able to facilitate this very generous gift of 100 head to a local volunteer fireman that had lost the majority of his cattle. The examples were many and each one took time. Every transaction was facilitated by the relationships that we had built with area livestock owners over 2 decades.

Friday, March 10, Kansas state veterinarian Dr. Bill Brown came to offer help. He was concerned for our well-being. He recognized our pace was not sustainable and with his encouragement, we formed a working group of individuals already serving. We gathered community leaders, dividing out the responsibilities and reducing the redundancy of our efforts. With this systematic approach, our efforts to care for the needs of our friends, neighbors, and families was streamlined.

The Ashland community served without reservation, helping those in need. We divided the responsibilities among 12 individuals who coordinated the volunteer help, gifts of hay, fence, and money. Business individuals, accountants, insurance agents, bank officers, tellers, teachers, and pharmacists – many who did not own an acre of land nor possess a cow, gave hours and hours to benefit the agricultural

community. As veterinarians, we are positioned to lead and coordinate these efforts.

For months after the fire, inquiries continued to come from many wanting to donate money to the victims. We directed those individuals to consider making donations to several official 501(c)(3) foundations that were actively seeking donations in an effort to equitably distribute gifts based on amount of loss. Even as late as 6 months after the fire, a livestock auction contacted us asking to distribute \$36,000. Instead of the transaction going through us, we provided the names of 4 families that lost homes. We were concerned about transparency and the credibility that the public conveys upon us as veterinarians. We guarded this trust carefully as offers outside the area continued to pour in.

**What we learned:**

- We as veterinarians are capable, and a necessary part of disaster management in rural America. Our training, critical thinking and ability to solve problems enables us to come alongside very difficult circumstances and lead. Using day-to-day diagnostic observation and financial understanding, many times we bridge the gap between life and death or financial gain or loss.
- We learned that, as veterinarians, we are crisis managers skilled in triage. Managing life and death occurs daily for each of us. As veterinarians, we understand the human-animal bond. With this knowl-

edge and experience, we can help livestock and pet owners manage life and death during disasters.

- Trust is the currency by which veterinarians establish relationships and is linked to the economy of the successful practice of veterinary medicine. A manner of trust is granted with a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine degree; however, years of caring service matures that confidence. With this earned trust, we were able to aid many clients in ways that no emergency preparedness personnel could have, providing insight and comfort during extraordinary pain and loss.

A harsh reality, more obvious during catastrophic events, is the fact we have too few young veterinarians committed to large animal or food animal practice in rural America. In 2016, Texas, Oklahoma, and Kansas graduated 305 veterinarians. Only 6% of the 305 graduates went on to practice in mixed or rural practices. This is not sustainable for our profession or protein production in our country.

The AABP has an opportunity to lead the charge in an effort to recruit and develop more food animal veterinarians. The opportunities are great to add more value to our clients' operations. We become "indispensable" by recognizing that the essence of indispensability is based on an unwavering passion for what we do and our willingness to forge relationships with our clients and the communities in which we serve.