

Ranchers struggle with fire recovery

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

GRAND COULEE, Wash. — The largest wildfire in Washington this season received little publicity, mainly because it was over so fast.

Whipped by sustained winds of 32 mph and gusts at 40-plus, the Grass Valley Fire burned 75,538 acres of mostly very dry private rangeland in northern Douglas County. Winds lessened and 200 firefighters from 10 local fire districts stopped it just shy of the towns of Grand Coulee and Coulee Dam. It mostly happened during eight hours on Aug. 11.

Now, two months later, about 20 affected ranches are struggling to survive and recover. They're dealing with a collective loss the Foster Creek Conservation District estimates at \$20 million to \$30 million.

Depending on moisture, it will be one to two years before cattle can graze the land again.

The ranchers say they're hampered in qualifying for USDA Farm Service Agency assistance because the fire hasn't been declared a disaster, it wasn't naturally caused and it wasn't a drought year. But the Chelan-Douglas County FSA executive director, Michel Ruud, said she's working to get them aid.

"Lightning didn't start it but there was a natural component in the wind and how terribly, terribly dry it was that day," said Allen Miller, 65, a third-generation rancher who saw 11,000 of his 25,000 owned and leased acres burn.

Saving cattle

The fire started from "failure of equipment or a heat source" in a straw baling operation about 1.5 miles east of Sims Corner (13 miles east of Mansfield), according to a report of Douglas County Fire District 5 (Mansfield Fire Department). "Equipment not operated properly" was a contributing factor, the report states. Pacific Ag, of Hermiston, Ore., was doing contract baling on property managed by Hunt Ranch, ranchers said. The fire quickly spread north eight miles to Leahy Junction before the wind shifted, blowing it eastward 20 miles to Grand Coulee.

At times it covered about 10,000 acres per hour. Firefighters, defending scarce homes, estimated flames as tall as 60 feet. An Okanogan County firefighter was injured. Brett Read, 38, was airlifted to a Seattle hospital for burns and now is recovering at home.

Twenty-four cattle died. One home and numerous barns, sheds, pump houses, water troughs and corrals burned.

Among ranchers saving cattle were Alex King, 33, his brother, Travis, 28, and their father, Wes, 60. They live



Mario Trejo fixes King Ranch fencing burned in the Grass Valley Fire on Aug. 11 in northern Douglas County, Wash. The fire burned approximately 300 miles of fencing that will cost \$4.5 million to \$7 million to replace.



From left, ranchers Lee Hemmer, Connie McKay, Foster Creek Conservation District Manager Amanda Ward and ranchers Wade King, Katie King, Teresa King, Allen Miller and Alex King on Miller's burned rangeland in northern Douglas County, Wash., Oct. 4.

in Odessa but have summer range in northern Douglas County.

On horseback, they moved half their herd, 100 mother cows with calves, to shelter in a semi-dried pond and held the cattle there as flames burned around and past them.

"It was really smoky. Visibility was horrible. They wanted to outrun the fire but we knew they couldn't," King said.

They held them without the help of dogs.

Another 100 pair found similar shelter on their own. Eight pair "went off a 450-foot cliff" above Banks Lake. "We found their bodies later at the bottom," he said.

Seeking help

King said he thinks the ranchers should be looking to recoup losses from Liberty Mutual, the insurance company of Pacific Ag, instead of taxpayers.

His uncle, Wade King, 58, Coulee City, owner of a separate ranch, said ranchers have filed claims with Liberty Mutual while at the same time asking U.S. Reps. Dan Newhouse and Cathy McMor-

ris-Rodgers to help them get federal aid.

"They are doing everything they can to not pay out. We hope we don't have to go through the courts," Wade King said of Liberty Mutual. "We would like them to step up and do what's right. If their client started a fire they should help out the neighbors here."

A Liberty Mutual spokesman, Glenn Greenberg, said the company doesn't comment on individual claims but said the ranchers' claims will be addressed. Pacific Ag did not respond to requests for comment.

Wade King was hardest-hit of the ranchers, owning or leasing and managing 18,550 acres, of which 18,000 burned, making up 24 percent of the total fire. He lost two cows with calves and moved over 500 pair to leased ground near Wilbur.

"My big concern is May to November next year. What to do. Where to go. If anyone has summer pasture for the next two years, we'd sure like to have some so we don't have to sell cows and cut into our genetic program," King said.



The Foster Coulee rangeland of King Ranch on Aug. 28, 17 days after the Grass Valley Fire. The green spot is one of the moist pond beds that didn't burn, typical of where cattle took shelter.

He said he needs to replace 82 miles of fencing at about \$15,000 per mile in labor and materials which adds up to \$1.2 million.

"There's also restoration, reseeding at \$60 to \$90 per acre if we can get the seed," he said.

It all adds up, he agreed, to a very real threat to his survival as a rancher.

"A disaster declaration would be a great help," he said. "It damn sure is a disaster for us."

Miller owns and leases about 25,000 acres, of which 11,000 burned. He has a herd of 300 pair and lost 60 miles of fencing. He's figuring \$11,000 per mile to repair and replace it and said that's "cost prohibitive without some form of assistance."

He had enough grass that didn't burn that he was OK for the remainder of the summer but is concerned about next year.

"Decisions not made yet. Don't know if we will be sell-

ing cattle or looking for other sources of feed, grounds to graze next summer," Miller said.

Mansfield rancher Lee Hemmer said 5,000 of his 20,000 acres burned and that he lost some wheat. Connie McKay, Grand Coulee, lost 3,200 acres and some fence only six years old, having been rebuilt after a 2012 fire.

Organizations help

Ranchers have reported a total of 302 miles of fencing damaged or destroyed but some of that may be double-reported from adjoining property owners reporting the same fence, said Ruud, the FSA director.

Ranchers typically don't insure fencing, and wildfires have to be lightning-caused to qualify for the FSA Emergency Conservation Program to fund 75 percent of fencing costs, Ruud said.

"However, the county FSA committee has requested national office approval for fence

funding due to extraordinary circumstances of dry conditions and high winds," she said.

The committee has asked for \$6.9 million to cover 75 percent of fencing costs. That's a higher per-mile cost than ranchers are figuring, Ruud said, because of land not accessible by vehicles. If approved it will not pay for fencing paid by insurance companies or pay twice for double-reported fence, she said.

FSA doesn't have a program to pay for reseeding. Natural reseeding usually occurs, she said.

It doesn't hurt, she said, for members of Congress to help obtain fence payments, which requires passage of the 2018 Farm Bill.

Similarly, the Emergency Livestock Assistance Program (ELAP) depends on passage of the Farm Bill for loss of grazing payments after Oct. 1, she said.

Even though it was not a drought year and the fire was not naturally caused, because it was extremely dry and the fire was exacerbated by high winds, the county committee was able to secure payments for Aug. 11 through Sept. 30 for ranchers, Ruud said. They were paid for feed or lease of grazing at a rate of 60 percent of the number of cow-calf pair per acre per day. The program covers grazing from April 1 to Nov. 1.

"Our money is never quick but we will always do all we can to help farmers and ranchers with losses," Ruud said.

King said he applied for ELAP but hasn't seen any money yet and knows it will be limited.

The Washington Cattlemen's Association, working to help the ranchers, said several things are needed: a disaster declaration to aid relief, allowing some grazing of Conservation Reserve Program and state Department of Natural Resources lands and better communications in northern Douglas County.

"Trump is supposed to help us with rural communications and we haven't seen it up here yet," King said. "During the fire our cell carrier was down, not related to the fire, as cell reception is terrible all the time up here. I couldn't tell my wife where I was."

Ruud said a disaster declaration isn't needed for several FSA loan programs. She said she can ask for a disaster declaration for emergency loans but that no one has asked for any yet since they are only granted if a rancher can't get a commercial loan.

She said the fire doesn't meet criteria for emergency grazing of CRP land, but that the state FSA director looking at what can be done.

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