

# Post Rock Extension District Column

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## **Considerations for Managing the Cowherd, Before and After the Fire**

Wildfires are undoubtedly among the most challenging natural disasters, and when they occur, they create immense hardship for our farming and ranching families and for rural communities. Here in Kansas, and many other areas of the central and southern Great Plains and western regions of the U.S, producers are generally accustomed to experiencing wildfires, particularly during late-winter and early-spring. However, the frequency and intensity of these fires seem to be growing each year. While the underlying conditions that influence wildfire occurrence and severity are complex, no one wishes them on their neighbors. We often don't like to think about the daunting situations or the "What do we do if this happens" scenarios, as we have so many other positive things to be grateful for right now in the beef industry. However, we think it is good for all of us as we enter this time of year to keep the following points in mind regarding cowherd management, should we be directly impacted by wildfire.

Make sure everyone involved in your operation has readily available contact information for those who need to be reached in case of an emergency. This includes spouses, children, employees, neighbors, and close relatives who live nearby. Do your children know the neighbors who live down the road and how to reach them in case of an emergency, and you cannot? Know who your designated emergency management officials are for your community and how to contact them. Everyone directly involved with your operation should know and be able to contact key folks such as an Extension professional, your nutritionist/feed service provider, and veterinarian, as those individuals may often need to be involved in making important herd management decisions during and after a wildfire event.

Inventory management of both feed and animals is one of the most challenging aspects of a cow-calf operation, regardless of size. Maintaining accurate pasture or group headcounts is always important, but it becomes even more critical when animals become scattered or comingled with other herds or are hastily relocated to a random location away from the direct path of a fire. Simply take time to ensure your headcounts are continually updated and accurate, so it is easier to reconcile differences in the event of an emergency. If fire occurs, it is helpful to know the initial hay inventory, the regular feeding disappearance, and differentiate between what was burned. Accurately documenting asset losses goes hand in hand with inventory management and is an important part of the process from a financial standpoint. For all of us, it is obvious when we lose an asset, but we must make sure we record and communicate that loss to those with whom we work. Video taken with your phone or trail camera, pictures, ear tags, and any other form of animal identification, as well as verification affidavits, are examples of documentation insurance companies and lenders will need when processing claims and verifying losses on assets.

Just as the people who work to save and care for them, the cattle that survive wildfires have endured significant stress. As you work with these animals in the days, weeks, and months following a fire, avoid adding undue stress whenever possible. Take the approach of providing critical, compassionate care with low-stress handling techniques. In emergency situations such as this, it's important to focus on basic animal care: safety, water, and feed. Once cattle are moved or located in a safe location, they need an

opportunity to rest, drink clean, fresh water, and then eventually consume feed. Keeping inventory of resources such as portable water tanks, refilling sites, and feed resources will help achieve this critical step.

Animals will need to be monitored very closely both immediately after and over the next several days post-event, as adrenaline subsides after this stressful time. Things to monitor are damaged eyes (similar symptoms to pinkeye), severe hoof damage or separation of the coronary band (indicating sloughing hooves), and secondary respiratory disease (pneumonia) from smoke inhalation. Triage may be appropriate for animals that need immediate intervention and for those under consideration for monitoring and treatment. Be prepared and plan accordingly to humanely euthanize animals if at any point they are in severe distress. Consult your veterinarian to develop a specific animal health management plan appropriate for surviving animals if necessary for your operation. It should be well outlined so you can act on and implement it when necessary. Monitor young calves closely in the days and weeks after the fire. Finally, it may be worth reassessing your culling criteria. There will be instances in which surviving cows are clearly injured to the extent that they are no longer able to be productive and must be culled from the herd, and there will also be cases in which only minor injuries occur, with resulting impacts on female productivity much more subtle. It will be important to reassess what injuries warrant a cull for your operation.

If you are directly impacted by wildfire, please remember that you are not alone and that there are resources to help, many of which can be found at your local Extension office. Two key resources for Kansas include the Kansas Forest Service Wildfire Response site and the Kansas Mesonet Fire Danger Forecast site. If we experience a wildfire, we need to remember that while taking care of everyone else around us, we also need to take care of ourselves in all aspects of life throughout the process. The overwhelming outpour of support always provided to those affected, and the way people from throughout the beef industry rally and come together during such events, are a testament to the strength of production agriculture and our rural communities.

Thanks to A.J. Tarpoff and Jason Warner, Kansas State Extension Specialists, for sharing information related to managing the cowherd before and after a fire. For further information, contact me at any Post Rock Extension District Offices in Beloit, Lincoln, Mankato, Osborne, or Smith Center.

*Post Rock Extension District of K-State Research and Extension serves Jewell, Lincoln, Mitchell, Osborne, and Smith counties. Blaire may be contacted at [blairet@ksu.edu](mailto:blairet@ksu.edu) or by calling Beloit 738-3597, Smith Center, 282-6823, Lincoln 524-4432, Mankato 378-3174, or Osborne 346-2521. Join us on Facebook at "Post Rock Extension" and remember our website is [www.postrock.ksu.edu](http://www.postrock.ksu.edu).*