

# Fire damages might exceed \$2 million

By **STEPHANIE DeCAMP**  
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 Damage caused by the wildfires Tuesday could exceed \$2 million, Fire Chief Bill Cathcart estimated Wednesday.

Five separate homesteads were in the path of the 35-mph flames, he said, but so far, firefighters have been able to protect the homes themselves. Many outbuildings have been damaged or destroyed, as well as several shelter belts, or windbreaks, and uncultivated cattle.

Fencing, farm equipment and power lines were all but ashes in the wake of the fire.

"Those trees took a long time to grow," Chief Cathcart said. "They're irreplaceable, really. All the crop land is just shriveled up; it's dead. Even the trees that didn't burn were severely damaged from the heat, and it was 115 degrees out there. We had vehicles with the temperature showing on the dash, and they were 140-150 degrees.

"And of course the vehicle that started the fire was a total loss."

That vehicle belongs to Damian Kogel, 19, of Herndon. Under-sheriff Allen Marcum said that Mr.

Kogel had been westbound, on his way home. He pulled over to the side of U.S. 36 in an area of green grass when his car began to overheat. The car quickly caught fire, and from there, the blaze took off.

"There's absolutely nothing he could have done about it," Mr. Marcum said. "He didn't do anything any of us wouldn't have done. He did what he was supposed to when your car overheats - he pulled out of traffic."

Mr. Kogel was not detained or charged with any crime. "There was no accident to report," Mr. Marcum said, "and no crime. Just a bad set of circumstances."

By sundown Wednesday, the fires had been contained, but Chief Cathcart was reluctant to say that they were over. The expected switch in the wind, from southwest to northeast, occurred around 8 p.m., and now, he said, it was finally starting to die down.

"Hopefully it will stay that way," he said. "We're going through the fields, slow and methodical, trying to put out every last ember. But we'll be ready if it starts back up again."

## Woman's home nearly lost to blaze

By **STEPHANIE DeCAMP**  
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Karen Chambers was in her store, the Rocking R, in downtown Oberlin when she got the news.

"I didn't even know the fire was out there," she said. "I got a call from my husband in Colorado, because Daren at the feedlot had called him to see, did we want to bring over our horses? We have 25 of them.

"When I got there, the fire hadn't gotten to the house yet. It was at the Mays' across the road; their tree line was on fire and part of their barn and sheds were burning."

She said she drove up her driveway and called her husband.

"I went into the house to get what valuables I could, and then I looked out the window and saw the flames through the tree line in back," she said.

The fire had jumped the road, and was headed her way.

Firefighters came and started to battle the blaze. They told Mrs. Chambers that she had to evacuate. With the fire on both sides of the road and her driveway the only way out, she could be trapped in the flames, they said. Mrs. Chambers let the miniature horses out of the barn, grabbed her dog and her valuables, drove to safety nearby and watched as the firefighters attempted to fight

not one, but now two out-of-control fires in her own front yard.

"They got it out finally," she said, "and so my granddaughter and I went back into the house. I was keeping an eye on the back, and sure enough, it caught on fire again."

This time it was a tree on fire, right next to the house.

"They were still over at the Mays', so I went over to get them. They came over with big farm equipment and dug a ditch all around the house and sprayed down the trees. They told me to keep an eye on it with the garden hose, then realized I had no electricity, so I couldn't!"

With her home now safe, Mrs. Chambers went over to the Mays'.

"I took water over there and began helping Evelyn and Martin because all these little fires kept spreading up in the yard," she said, "so we got their hose and just kept putting them out. Thank God they were able to save their house."

Thankfully, she added, no one was injured.

"Well, I didn't sleep very well last night," she said, laughing a little bit as she looked out the window of the shop. It was 108 degrees on Penn Avenue.

"I just kept going back out there and checking to make sure it wasn't on fire again."



**DECATUR COUNTY** firemen pulled their hose over a car at the Bremer homestead Tuesday to put out the flames of the Bremer's one-of-a-kind barn, seen here collapsed in the background. Area farmers (below) looked at the smoldering

fields east of the Mays' farmstead and north of U.S. 36. They had been out carrying buckets of water to the flames since the fire started around 1 p.m.

- Herald staff photos by Stephanie DeCAMP

## \*Fires draw crews

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Wednesday morning to ban the sale and shooting off of fireworks. Oberlin Mayor Bill Riedel signed an order banning the sale and discharge of fireworks in town. Shooting off fireworks now is a class "A" misdemeanor.

Almost 24 hours after the first call came in Decatur County, fire fighters were still in the field dealing with hot spots from the blaze.

### HOW IT HAPPENED

At mid-afternoon Tuesday evening, no one seemed to know if the fire was contained or not.

"It's burned out in a few places" said farmer Roland May, "but it's not contained anywhere."

Farming equipment and families were being evacuated by then. It seemed like every time a fire was put down, the wind would pick up and start it back up again. These "hot spots" continued to cause problems into Wednesday night.

There simply weren't enough firemen to go around. And no matter how many trucks pulled in with water tanks, there was never enough of that, either.

By 4:39 p.m. Tuesday, the eastern side of the fire had been contained, and by 4:45 p.m. the northern side was declared contained as well.

"It's like the dust bowl in the heavy spots," said a text message from the fire front. "If it's not soot and ash flying in your face, then it's dust."

"All I know is I've seen a lot of farmers and a lot of different fire



departments," said Dan Grafel, treasurer and a board member of D&S Grain of Traer.

By 5 p.m., the fire was reported 80 percent contained. At 5:37 p.m. Sheriff Badsy confirmed who had lost property so far.

The fire crews, with the exception of some from Nebraska, worked all through the night and through Wednesday, battling hot spots.

Wednesday morning, an observer reported that the fields north of U.S. 36 "look like Mordor (the fictional "hell" of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*). Everything smells burnt and it's black as far as the northern horizon. Its so quiet now that all you can hear is the wind; even emergency vehicles pass quietly over the ash."

Volunteers could be seen driving down county roads, spraying water at smoldering debris in the ditches to prevent more flareups.

"All I can say is, don't buy any fireworks," said volunteer firefighter Larry Ayers of Oberlin. "I don't think weather conditions will change that much by the Fourth."

At 10:45 a.m. Mrs. Doeden confirmed the number of people who had been to the hospital due to the fire.

"I am so impressed with how the community has pulled together," she said. "We really worked together to keep our fire fighters safe. Jacque Boultinghouse, the emergency director, is doing a fantastic job organizing donations and supplies at Dollar General."

No smoke could be seen from town, but south of Oberlin firefighters were frantically working to dig ditches to prevent a fire from spreading before the wind could change course, Chief Cathcart said. The wind, which had been blowing southwest all morning, was expected to switch to the northeast in the afternoon.

At 11:08 a.m., Chief Cathcart said that all the fires were contained. He advised people not to drive through any fields and to stick to designated roads. One flare-up the previous night had been caused just by a truck pulling into a pasture, he said.

### THE FIRES CONTINUE

At 3:10 p.m., a fifth fire sprung up in Norton County, two miles east of Logan.

Chief Cathcart didn't know how or why it had started, but he related the news with grim determination.

"Dispatch just told me that there's a weather advisory, too," he said. "We have a dry lightning advisory in western Kansas and eastern Colorado, so we'll see how tonight goes. Dry lightning ... that's something we don't need."

The remaining fires stayed contained through the evening Wednesday, but as the sunset, people couldn't help but wonder what tomorrow would bring.

"It's pretty scary," said Karen Chambers, owner of Rocking R downtown, on the day of the fire. "I thought my house (at 1959 500th Road) was going up in flames earlier. We came and got our dog and personal stuff out, and then they told us to leave."

As she said this, a tree at the back corner of her house again erupted in flames.

And we prayed for rain.

## \*County urges people to take precautions

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People need to take every precaution, agreed Mr. Gallentine.

Mr. Unger encouraged everyone to be proactive, trying to prevent fires rather than putting them out. He suggested farmers fill up their available water tanks, noting that if the fire got a power line, farm pumps wouldn't work. He said it wouldn't hurt to hook

up a tractor to a disc. The disc might not put out a fire, but it could help contain one.

The commissioners suggested that people establish fire breaks around their farmsteads if possible. Mr. Unger said property owners should remove combustibles close to buildings.

## \*Family stays in travel trailer at homestead

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couldn't leave last night with all the fires going back up, and that camper was a Godsend."

The firemen came back to check on all of the families hit by the fire, she said, to make sure that none of the hot spots had started up again.

"You just have to count your

blessings and be thankful that nobody was hurt," she said, her voice sounding tired but resilient. "I hope to never see this again. Even the corn was on fire, I've just never seen anything like it before. It was such a shock."

A big tragedy for the family was the loss of their barn, which was a

kind of landmark in the area.

"That barn was 95 years old," she said. "There was only one other in the community that was built like that, and it's was Clyde Bernon's father's. They were identical; they were the only two in Decatur County, and his was already gone. But we're thankful to have our house

and to move on from this.

"We're just thankful for what we have left, and for everybody's support. I can't thank the firefighters enough."



**Hip-Hip Hooray!**  
 The firemen and volunteers continue to beat the flames!  
 Thanks to our firemen and volunteers for their hard work and dedication to serve.  
**Crossroads Express**  
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**We are truly grateful.**  
 Many thanks to our volunteers and firemen for their dedication and loyal service. They have persevered through many hours of service through these past few days.  
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