



FLAMES LEAPT HIGH as a fire raced through wheat stubble during a fire Saturday night along the Sappa Creek Road west of town, near the old Arlo Wurm place. Fire crews from Oberlin, Jennings, Norcatour and several neighboring counties gathered to fight the fire and a smaller one farther west. — Herald staff photo by Stephanie DeCamp

Fire!

Blazes keep firefighters on the move

Wildfire takes three days to subdue

By STEPHANIE DeCAMP
sdecamp@nwkansan.com

The biggest of the wildfires that ripped through Decatur County on Tuesday and Wednesday was finally put down for good by Thursday, Fire Chief Bill Cathcart said Friday.

Firefighters, emergency medical service workers and volunteers worked from about 1 p.m. Tuesday, when the fire began, straight through to Thursday morning fighting a powerful wind.

But they weren't fighting it alone. Dozens of people came out to help, passing out water and putting down hot spots when firemen couldn't

get to them.

While the main fire was contained Tuesday night, five other fires plagued the county over the following 48 hours, and half a dozen more erupted from dry lightning Saturday night.

There is no official list of damages yet, the chief said, but he estimated it would exceed \$2 million. While barns, outbuildings, farm equipment and cattle were lost, no one died, was seriously injured or lost their homes to the fire.

Those fighting the fire faced challenges: 35 mph winds, little moisture and temperatures up to 115 degrees all conspired to feed the fires.

Hot spots continued to spring up in areas that had already been put down, driving firefighters and volunteers to scramble over the fields, snuffing out fires they had already extinguished.

Donations of money, water, sports drinks and food came pouring into Dollar General Tuesday and Wednesday. Raye's Grocery and Decatur Health Systems donated food and supplies, and volunteers put together dozens of sandwiches.

Fire rigs from Rawlins and Sheridan counties came to help, as well as the Red Willow Western, Beaver Valley and Culbertson departments in Nebraska, Chief Cathcart said.

Blazes just keep coming

At least a dozen wildfires have torn through Decatur County since last Tuesday, Fire Chief Bill Cathcart said, and the blazes are likely to continue until we get rain.

All but one of the fires were caused by lightning, he said, and damages are likely to exceed \$2 million.

The two biggest of the first round of fires started near the Ralph Unger farm, seven miles west of town, on Tuesday, and off of the Rexford Road, six miles south of U.S. 36, early the next morning, Mr. Cathcart said.

The first fire, on wheat stubble at the Unger farm, started when an overheated car pulled over along U.S. 36 and set fire to the dry grass in the ditch. That fire then spread four miles north and two to three miles east and west, and was not completely extinguished for three days.

A fire on the Rexford Road was called in at 3 a.m. Wednesday, when lightning struck some bales of alfalfa, he said. Firefighters worked to put it out until 8 a.m., then returned to the fire in the area of the Unger farm.

At 10 a.m., they went back to the Rexford fire, and after two and a half hours, were able to extinguish it.

All was calm until 9:30 p.m. when another fire broke out by the Rex- (See NUMEROUS on Page 8A)



A FIRE AT SAPPAPARK on Saturday (above) spread into old logs used at the black-powder shoot grounds, making a spectacular blaze. The fire started when lightning hit a tree and spread through dry grass around the campground. Norcatour fire crews on the way to another blaze put it out, sparing the cabin. For Chief Bill Cathcart (right), filling the rural fire department's big tanker Wednesday with stepson Baron Green probably was almost a break.

— Herald staff photos by Steve Haynes (above) and Stephanie DeCamp (right)



Storms bring lightning but no moisture to fields

By STEPHANIE DeCAMP
sdecamp@nwkansan.com

Thunderstorms that swept through Decatur County on Saturday didn't leave much moisture, but they left plenty of fire.

"It was all lightning and no rain," Fire Chief Bill Cathcart said of the storm.

The first call Saturday came at 5 p.m. and was a false alarm. Dust devils had begun to appear near the Martin May farm west of town and people thought it was smoke starting up again, firemen said.

At that same time, a small fire started in a ditch 13 miles west of town on U.S. 36. It

was just the start of another long night, Chief Cathcart said, as firefighters from all over came out to battle at least six simultaneous blazes.

"We had crews going everywhere," Mr. Cathcart said. "We called in Rawlins County, Sheridan, Norton and Red Willow counties. We had five fires going at the same time, and they said there were more than that at Jennings."

The Decatur County department received a dry lightning warning from the National Weather Service office in Goodland, so they were patrolling the county on fire watch, he

said. Crews were called to the station while others went out in the trucks.

"That's when we saw the lightning hit and the fire start out by the TV station," the chief said. "The ensuing fires were 10 miles west of town, 8 miles west and three south, six miles west and five south, 12 miles south and then one at Jennings, at the golf club."

The fifth fire erupted at the area leased to the Black Powder Club at Sappa Park. The club had set up dead logs for target practice and seating, so when a tree was struck by lightning and its trunk exploded, there was plenty of kindling to feed the flames.

Men on three Norcatour fire rigs on their way to help at the fire out west heard the call, saw the smoke at the park and diverted to that fire. They had their hands full for a while with blazing logs and flames racing through dry grass, but kept the fire away from a cabin at the campground.

A call for chain saws brought for volunteers racing in pickups from town. Part of the crew battled the flames from 5:30 p.m. to 1 the next morning, but one of the Norcatour rigs went onto the fires west of town.

"Before we left the station at 1 a.m., we (See LIGHTNING on Page 8A)

State system still has problems

By STEPHANIE DeCAMP
sdecamp@nwkansan.com

State officials in Topeka say a new computer system for motor vehicle registration and driver's licenses is running "200 percent" better than it was when installed a month ago, but Decatur County officials say it's still causing some problems.

Staff at the Kansas Division of Motor Vehicles said last week the improved efficiency has eliminated much of the waiting and long lines which cropped up in larger coun-

ties.

However, at the end of the week, the state announced that it would not pay the final 10 percent of its contract for the \$40 million system until all the problems are resolved.

The Topeka Capital Journal reported that Department of Revenue had notified the 3M Co. on Thursday that it needs to improve the new software, which has caused long lines and frustration at motor vehicle offices across the state since it was installed seven weeks ago.

Donna Shelite, the state director of vehicles, told Shawnee County commissioners that as many as 73,000 records didn't convert correctly. Shelite said state officials had asked 3M to address issues with response time, availability, bugs and maintenance.

In Decatur County, workers say (See COMPUTER on Page 8A)

Blood needed to help with disasters

By STEPHANIE DeCAMP
sdecamp@nwkansan.com

The blood supply for Kansas hospitals this month is half of what it should be, the American Red Cross says, and that could make coping with natural disasters like the wildfires this week even more difficult for emergency workers and hospital personnel.

"We haven't had a problem so much here," said Lynn Doeden, administrator of the Decatur County Hospital. "However, we are doing a blood drive on (Tuesday) July 17.

"With the fire like we had, if there had been a lot of serious injuries, we weren't sure if we would have

been able to help. We were lucky. So we're going to push big time to get everyone to donate."

All blood types are needed, the Red Cross said, and people can donate once every 56 days. Those donating must be at least 17 and weigh at least 110 pounds.

Diabetics and those with allergies may donate as long as they don't have a fever, temperature or problems breathing, Mrs. Doeden said. You cannot donate if you have high blood pressure, but if you are on medication and it is regular, you can.

If you have any questions about whether or not you can donate, call the Red Cross at (866) 236-3276.



What next for fire-ravaged stubble fields?

By STEPHANIE DeCAMP
sdecamp@nwkansascorp.com

The burnt, dry ground of the fields that surround Oberlin — some only a few weeks ago covered in ripened wheat — raise a few questions. Mainly, what now?
“We have to get rain first of all,” said Matthew Barnes, the district conservationist with the U.S. Natural Resources Conservation Service.
“The amount of ash residue will cause the ground to be very hard, so it won’t be very easily plowed.”

There’s also the problem of runoff when it does eventually rain, he said.
“When it does rain on the ash residue, the soil won’t intercept the water and allow it to soak in... so there will be a lot of runoff. It’s like pouring water on concrete. More water runs off of a smooth surface, and that’s what we have now.
“In coming crop years, the residue will continue to cause this phenomenon. It will take three or four years before it really gets back to normal.”
Wind erosion could also be a big prob-

lem, he said, both for crop lands and the surrounding grasslands.
“You’re going to want to get something growing on it as soon as possible,” Mr. Barnes said, “but that’s impossible with the lack of rainfall since winter. The soot and the dirt are already blowing off the fields, and they’re going to continue to do so until it rains, and we at least get some weeds going.
“I’m not worried about the grassland. It’ll be fine. But crop land is a whole other matter. We need to establish vegetation as

soon as possible to prevent erosion, and also for more water retention and better crop production in the future. And that takes rain, so we’ll see.”
So what about the grasslands?
“Obviously, it’s a great loss of habitat, especially with the fire at the same time as the drought,” said Alex Heeger, the “farm bill” wildlife biologist at the U.S. Department of Agriculture.
“The species there are out of some prime conditions,” he said. “As far as the habitat is concerned, fire is a great management

tool that we use quite a bit to reset it, but it remains to be seen what kinds of species will come back in those burned areas with the amount of moisture we get over the next few months.”
Mr. Barnes said that achieving normal conditions again will depend on the moisture we get.
“If we get a decent rain, it will start coming back soon,” he said, “but it will be several months before we get any healthy stand of grass out there.”

* Lightning causes numerous blazes

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got another call out to 11 south and one west of Oberlin, to a pasture fire out there,” the chief said. “We were there from 1:30 a.m. to 3:30 a.m.
“This is going to keep happening until we get a significant amount of moisture. With 100-degree days and the wind, everything is just so dry. I have to say again, do not drive off the road, keep on the roads at all time. The heat of an engine is enough to spark the grass.”
Mr. Cathcart said he was grateful for all the help the fire department received over the last week.
“Thank you to everybody that’s helped,” he said. “There are too many, I can’t even name them all. But we appreciate all the help, and we wouldn’t have been able to do as well as we have without it.”

Special raises cash

Donations have poured in for the fire extra edition put out by *The Oberlin Herald* staff Thursday after the first of several wildfires.
The *Herald* staff has counted over \$1,200 in donations for the section, which is being raised for the many volunteers who helped fight the fires. Plans aren’t yet set for how to use the money.
A copy of the extra edition is included inside today’s newspaper.



CHARRED FIELDS AND PASTURE stretched almost to the horizon toward the Beaver Creek in this aerial view of the big fire which raced through northwest Decatur County on

Tuesday. County Commissioner Gene Gallentine took photos of the devastation. The fire reportedly stopped about two miles from homes in the Traer area. — Photo by Gene Gallentine

Vendors can’t sell fiery stock

By STEPHANIE DeCAMP
sdecamp@nwkansascorp.com

After a week’s worth of fires, fireworks are a no-go for the Fourth. But what happens to all those firecrackers — and the people who were planning to sell them — now?
Jonathan Fick planned to put on a display Saturday at the city ballpark, synched to music, and still plans on doing so once the ban is lifted.
“If I need to, I can go and ask for a permit,” he said, adding that if the ban is lifted in the county and not the city, he’s had offers to put on the show at private farms.
Mr. Fick said has already done the required three fireworks displays under the guidance of a licensed technician to qualify for his license, but has yet to take the test. He said that his shows synch the fireworks to music to a hundredth of a second.

While he’s waiting for the weather to change, he’s hanging on to his supply. But what about all those vendors?
Sharon Stevenson, who runs Mockry’s Fireworks near Cedar Bluffs, says it’s actually not that big of a deal. She sells the fireworks on consignment, she said, and her suppliers just buy back what she doesn’t sell.
“No hardship, really,” she said. “I was getting them for my church youth group to sell. I thought, ‘I’ve been in it for over 30 years. I’ll see if they want to do it,’ and of course they jumped on the idea.
“The only hardship was on them, because they got everything out and got it all priced, and now they can’t sell them.”
The youth group, the Justified Youth of the McCook Assembly

of God, raises money for local and foreign missions, Pastor Jamie Mockry said. They draw anywhere from 15-25 students a week.
“We already run the concession stands at the race track, a food booth at the fair — both in Red Willow County — and then small fund raisers around town,” he said.
It’s an inconvenience to have to sell the fireworks back, he said, but not a setback for the group.
“We usually raise around \$5,000 a year for missions,” he said.
Fireworks are still allowed in McCook, but because Mrs. Stevenson is only registered to sell them in Kansas, even though the stand is right across the state line, she cannot continue her sale there.
The laws governing fireworks have changed a lot over the years, she said.

“When we first started, we could sell the big stuff,” she said, “like M80s and cherry bombs, but of course all that was outlawed. I’d say it was back in the ‘80s sometime. And then it used to be that Nebraska couldn’t sell a lot of things, so we’d get business from over there.
“I’ve had a lot of customers throughout the years. People remember us and say, ‘Well, my folks brought me here when I was a kid, so now I’m bringing my kids.’”
Mrs. Stevenson said she is retired now, and depending on next year, may or may not continue to sell fireworks.
“Oh I don’t know from one year to another,” she said. “When you’ve been at it for so long you tend to think, oh, one more year. But I’ve been planning on quitting for a long time now.”

* Numerous fires keep firefighters running to keep up

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ford Road. It was a pasture fire due to lightning 11 miles south, and it took firefighters three hours to subdue it.
“You could see the glow from Oberlin,” Mr. Cathcart said Friday. “I was up at a restaurant this morning, and one of my friends said you could see it from Dresden, too.”
Friday was calm, he said, and there were no fires reported.
Saturday saw at least six fires spring up, four along the Sappa

Creek Road six to eight miles west and three to four miles south of Oberlin, and the fifth at the black powder area at Sappa Park. All were caused by lightning, and the Decatur department had to call in neighboring counties for help again.
The fires weren’t put out until 3:30 a.m. Sunday. By Monday, almost a week after the first fire began, there had been at least a dozen fires, and still no word of rain.

Country agrees to buy new light rescue truck

By STEPHANIE DeCAMP
sdecamp@nwkansascorp.com

Decatur County commissioners agreed to buy a new fire truck for the Norcat Rural Fire Department, approving a bid for \$99,751 for the light rescue truck.
Fire Chief Bill Cathcart presented the bid at the meeting June 12 from Weis Fire and Safety out of Salina for a Quick Attack 500. The truck will be paid for on delivery.
“So we might have it by Christmas?” Commissioner Ralph Unger asked.
This is the first purchase in the eventual replacement of nine rural fire trucks in the county, Chief

Cathcart said.
At the same meeting, commissioners approved the sale of an old ambulance to Norton County. The county had planned to trade the older ambulance in to Wheeled Coach, a national manufacturer.
Instead, the commissioners agreed to purchase an ambulance from Wheeled Coach, one similar to what they already have, and then sell the older one to Norton County. The sale was to go through this week, with the old ambulance to be delivered to Norton in 60-90 days.
County Attorney Steve Hirsch will be handling the details.



A RURAL FIRE RIG SPRAYED water on flames spreading through wheat stubble southwest of Oberlin on Saturday. Crews from at least four counties helped fight the fire near

the Sappa Creek Road, about six miles west and five miles south of town. — Herald staff photo by Stephanie DeCamp



MOPPING UP A HOT SPOT, a rural fire crew was spraying smoldering debris in a roadside ditch on Wednesday northwest of Oberlin. Some spots burned into Thursday at the biggest of more than a dozen fires which broke out last week in Decatur County, forcing fire fighters to call in help from surrounding counties and keeping crews busy for days at a time. — Herald staff photo by Stephanie DeCamp

Class sizes set for next school year

Class sizes and teacher assignments have been set for next year at Oberlin Elementary School, Principal Duane Dorshorst told the Oberlin School Board, but he still needs to hire one teacher.
Kindergarten, second, fourth and sixth grades will be split into two classes, he reported at a meeting June 11, while first, third and fifth grades will be in one classroom.
Kindergarten has 26 students with two sections, he said. The teachers will be Diana Steinmetz and Jeni Henningson.

- First grade will have 18 students in one section with Cindy Sattler teaching.
- Second grade has two sections with 25 students and Kathy Tacha and Kimberly Witt teaching.
- Third grade has one section with 20 kids and Kerrie Wahlmeier teaching.
- Fourth grade has 32 kids in two sections with Sherri Ruf and Judy Elwood teaching.
- Fifth grade has 21 students but no teacher.
- Sixth grade has 31 in two sec-

tions with Carol Dixson and Sandy Ketterl teaching.
Mr. Dorshorst said he’s advertised for a fifth grade teacher and has received 20 applications so far. He said he did open it up to the staff first and only had one person interested in changing to that class.
Principal Ben Jimenez said the schedule at the junior and senior high school is pretty much set. He said they are working on creating an assessment prep class for kids who didn’t score very well on state tests the previous year.

* Computer still has kinks

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they think the system eventually should be much better than the old one.
“Once the system’s kinks have been worked out, it will be a better system overall,” said Abby Diederich of the Decatur County treasurer’s office. “It’s a work in progress.”
“I’m thankful we haven’t had the problems bigger counties have. We do seem to have more access to available information. Basically, the Driver’s License Bureau and

Motor Vehicle Department are linked now.
“It’s quicker for the customer and for us, but it may take a couple of years before it’s functioning at the level it needs to be.”
The previous system was 25 years old, and according to Revenue Department statement, the new one should be, too, when it’s replaced.
“We are focused on making this the best system for Kansas — one that will last the next several decades,” said Revenue Secretary Nick Jordan.

Staffer to visit

Congressman Tim Huelskamp plans to have a member of his staff here on Monday.
The staffer will hold office hours from 1 to 2 p.m. in the courtroom at the Decatur County Courthouse.
The staff member will listen to people’s ideas on Washington issues and also talk to those who need help