

Arson?

Drought threatens wheat crop

By **STEPHANIE DeCAMP**
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If you thought this summer must have been what the Dust Bowl was like, you wouldn't be too far off.

The year's moisture levels in Decatur County were as low as the peak years of the Dust Bowl, which left land arid and fruitless for years, said state Climatologist Mary Knapp at Kansas State University. In fact, she said, this is the second driest year on record.

According to the records, Ms. Knapp said, Oberlin has had 9.62 inches of rain through November, with precipitation this year 11.38 below the long-term average of 21 inches so far. In 1939, rainfall was 11.05 below normal. In other words, if this drought hangs around another five years, she said, we could be looking at a similar disaster.

But not all hope is lost. Mrs. Knapp said that part of the problem in drawing conclusions from this data is that this year came on the heels of a wetter period, so we could just as reasonably expect wetter conditions for next year, too. This year's wheat crop, she said, could still do well if we get a wet December or a good spring.

But people are worried. Bill Spegal, who works for Kansas Wheat, an alliance of the Kansas Wheat Commission and the Kansas Association of Wheat Growers, said that so far, this is getting ready to be one of the worst wheat crops on record.

"The 2013 wheat crop is rated at just 30 percent good to excellent — the second poorest wheat crop in mid-November that Kansas Agricultural Statistics has ever recorded," he said in the organization's monthly report.

According to that report, one of the setbacks for this year's crop has been growth of the crown root, the part of the root from which the stem rises, because of the dry weather.

Ideally, said the report, the roots should be well-developed by now to help the plant prepare to get through the winter. They take up most of the water and nutrients in the soil and anchor the plant to the ground.

"Wheat prefers to be in the ground, sprouted and heading to dormancy with tillering by about this time," said agricultural agent Keith Van-Skike of the Twin Creeks Extension District office in Norton. "Usually it gets into that deep dormancy period around the first or second week of December, when it's at its hardest state. But it doesn't grow much in dormancy, so you want as many tillers as you can get."

"More tillers per foot means more heads per foot of row, and that's very directly related to yield. The more heads you get, the better chances of a good yield. If you have one big head it's great, but you get more out of 10 little heads."

Mr. VanSkike said the things farmers should be watching for are high winds and erosion. Some farmers are making last-ditch efforts to save their wheat, he said, including emergency tilling to help keep wind erosion at bay or even replanting their fields.

"We can recover," he said. "Some farmers might have replanted if things are very sparse. Usually, sparse is less than four or five plants per foot of row. That would have been in October if they did that. But it's been so dry, I don't know if they would have had a successful effort. There's not much you can do right now but pray for a good soaking rain."

"Wheat is a very amazingly resilient crop; that's the one good thing about it. The genetics and wheat-breeding programs have really helped it to be very hardy. It can do amazing things with just some of the most basic amounts of nutrients. It can do an excellent job when given the slightest of chances."

Substation repairs cost over \$742,000

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It's almost been a year since Sparky the raccoon brought down Oberlin's electrical substation, and the City Council is just starting to see the total cost.

The latest step in the repair process was Monday, Oct. 29, when crews put the city's rebuilt transformer back online. A brief power outage, lasting only a few seconds for most people, announced the change.

"We're finally starting to get the bills on it," said city administrative assistant Steve Zodrow, a certified public accountant. "We're over \$730,000 already, and that was several weeks ago."

"We do have some more invoices that haven't been paid yet," said City Administrator Karen Larson, "that are going to bring the substation repairs up to \$742,000. Plus, that isn't the end. We are not sure how much more the insurance company will pay, but it is looking better than anticipated."

Expenses stand at \$741,508 right now, according to an e-mail sent by Sandy Rush, the deputy city clerk. This compares to the \$547,000 estimate the council got at its end-of-year meeting.

The cost breaks down like this:
 • The original estimate for repairing the transformer was \$320,000,

but it has cost \$397,830
 • Repairing the substation was estimated at \$142,000, but totals \$189,753.

• Renting a transformer to take the place of the old one while it was rebuilt was supposed to be \$85,000, but has set the city back \$150,712.

At that same meeting almost a year ago, Mrs. Larson said that it would likely take four to six months for the repairs to be done. If the city were to buy a new transformer instead, she said, it would cost \$640,000, which combined with the substation repairs, would have totaled roughly \$830,000, about \$100,000 more than the city has spent.

The city has gotten \$430,000 back from its insurance carrier, Employers Mutual Casualty Insurance, said City Foreman Dan Castle, but is only allowed to cash in for \$500,000, which means that no matter what, the city has an out-of-pocket loss of \$240,000 right now. The project, said Mr. Castle, is about 90 percent done, and should be finished in January. People should expect a few more brief power interruptions during the January transitions, he added.



A FIREFIGHTER STRUGGLED to breathe (above) out at Sappa Park Friday while putting out a one-acre fire that is suspected to have been set intentionally. The fire was called in by landowner Jim Abbey (below center) who helped battle the blaze with Fire Chief Bill Cathcart (below left) and family friend Phil Kirk (below right).
 — Herald staff photos by Stephanie DeCamp

Fire put out at park

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Police and a landowner believe that a fire that broke out Friday afternoon may have been set intentionally.

The fire, about 3 miles east and 1 1/2 miles north of Oberlin, started on Jim Abbey's property but quickly swept into the Sappa Park area, which is owned by the City of Oberlin.

Mr. Abbey reported the fire after he happened to be walking the property with family friend Phil Kirk of St. Louis.

Mr. Kirk said that as soon as they noticed the fire, they noticed a man standing up from it.

"If we'd been here five minutes later, it would have been a whole different ball game," he said that afternoon while helping Mr. Abbey and Fire Chief Bill Cathcart with a fire hose. "We came over that hill right as he lit the match, I think."

Mr. Kirk described the suspect as a white man in his late 20s with brown hair. Both men said that as soon as the man stood and saw them, he began running straight south of the fire and toward U.S. 36.

The Decatur County sheriff's office said that the fire was in Oberlin's city jurisdiction and that the Oberlin Police Department did the investigation. Police Chief Troy Haas, however, could not be reached for comment Monday. He reportedly was on vacation.

Mr. Cathcart said volunteers from the Decatur County Rural Fire Department worked to put out the fire until 11 that night.

"It wasn't a very big fire; it burned less than



an acre," he said Monday. "There were quite a few trees burnt up in it, though."

Mr. Cathcart said that the fire department hasn't responded to any other calls since the county lifted its burn ban four weeks ago, other than to check out a few controlled burns to make sure everything was OK.

"I think that we put the burn ban on and everybody is aware of how dry it is," he said. "Everyone is being cautious about it, and I don't see any reason to put it back on. Weather conditions have changed, and it's supposed to get colder this week, so I don't think we'll have any reason to put it back on."

Denise Abbey, Mr. Abbey's wife, thinks differently, however.

"I would really like to see the burn ban put back on," Mrs. Abbey said. "I don't think the conditions have changed enough to lift it. Initially, we thought it was supposed to be a controlled burn that had gone wrong."

Of the fire's origins, Mrs. Abbey could say little, but she was pretty sure that no charges would be brought and that no one had been arrested for starting the fire.

"We just know that there were kids from the 180 House out there," she said, "but we can't say for certain if it was deliberate or accidental. It's my understanding that they were supposed to be in school and weren't. I haven't talked to anybody with the police department, so I don't know too much. Just that there was a fire, and kids were seen running away from it. As far as anything concrete, we really can't say. We're just thankful it was seen when it was; it kept us from losing the park."

"I do know that Jim had visited with Jay Tate and it didn't sound like any charges were going to be pressed. It didn't sound like the county attorney was going to prosecute either, because there's no way to really find out if it was intentional."

"It would have been nice to hold someone accountable for these actions, but it's not like we're out to get someone arrested. These kids already have a tough time of it... I think it will blow over and won't be a big deal."

"The main thing is that the park was saved. It would have been devastating to the community if it were gone."

City to close Phase 1 of water project

This week's City Council meeting will mostly be about closing projects out for the end of the year, said City Administrator Karen Larson.

The pool project won't be discussed this week, she said. Instead, it will be the subject of the next meeting, at 7 p.m. on Thursday, Dec. 20, when Mayor Rob McFee

will be present. The mayor will miss this week's meeting due to family concerns, she said. Council President Rusty Addleman will be filling in for him.

"This week we're going to close out Phase 1 of the water project," Mrs. Larson said, "which is quite a big, extensive thing. We're closing out all of the bonds we've gotten for

it and refinancing the project with a new loan. There are a couple of ordinances that need to be passed for it to work out, so we'll be doing that, too.

"We may talk about the land where we're going to put our new wells if Chris Miller (of McCook engineering firm Miller and Associates) comes."

Mrs. Larson said that other than these items, she will probably do a brief report on the airport project, and the council will hear department reports. Council meetings are at 7 p.m. on the first and third Thursdays of every month at The Gateway, and are open to the public.

Development group seeks investors for motel

The Oberlin-Decatur County Economic Development Corp. plans a public meeting to seek investors for a new motel at 7 p.m. Thursday, Dec. 13, at The Gateway.

Greg Lohofener, who along with Marketing Director Connie Grafel, has been working on the project for more than a year, said a newer motel should draw more people to town

and help businesses here. "Many people in the community feel we need an added motel for the benefit of The Gateway, as well as other activities," he said. "It will enhance the ability of The Gateway to have multi-day events."

Mr. Lohofener said that he will be going to the City Council meeting Thursday to present the idea,

and see if the space on the southeast corner of The Gateway's property is still available for a motel site. He said that this is just one of a few proposed sites.

"Our main goal, as an economic development project, is to get a group of investors organized to make final decisions on whether or not to proceed and to discuss

the benefits or added expenses of being a name-brand motel versus a private name. We're going to try to make this a reality for 2013, or at the latest, 2014."

Mr. Lohofener said that a contractor and an architect will be at the meeting to answer questions and discuss the project in detail.
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