

Fires destroy the land

Flames eat up 7,000 acres

By STEPHANIE DeCAMP
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Four fires ripped through Decatur County, destroying fields, barns and farm machinery from about 1 p.m. Tuesday into Wednesday night.

The fires, which devoured an estimated 7,000 acres of field, pasture and crops, sent six people to the Decatur County Hospital, with three being admitted.

Hospital Administrator Lynn Doeden said the patients were seen for smoke inhalation and heat exhaustion, and one was treated for burnt eyes from all of the smoke and ash.

The first and biggest of the fires was started when Damian Kogel, 19, of Herndon, pulled his car off the road when it overheated on U.S. 36 about 1 p.m., Undersheriff Allen Marcum said. He had been heading westbound on his way home. Mr. Kogel then pulled into green grass about seven miles west of town, and the fire, driven by a stiff south wind, raced from under his car and jumped into a field of fresh wheat stubble to the north.

"There was nothing he could have done about it," Officer Marcum said. "He didn't do anything you or I wouldn't have done. I mean, that's what you're supposed to do when a car overheats: get off the road."

The undersheriff said that since no crime had been committed and no one had been injured, Mr. Kogel was allowed to go home.

Those who lost land, machinery and structures included Connie Grafel, Dianne Bremer, Ralph Unger and Martin May, said Decatur County Fire Chief Bill Cathcart. A total of damages has yet to be done, he said, so more people could have been affected.

The main fire was north of U.S. 36. A second fire was called in later that afternoon south of town, and a third fire reported that evening was a mile and a half north of the first. At 4:30 a.m. Wednesday another fire was reported at a farmstead southwest of town.

Sheriff Ken Badsy said it can take two to four years before burned fields can be planted again.

"Pray for rain," he added, grimacing over the blackened fields.

All fire stations from Decatur County — Oberlin, Norcat and Jennings — responded, as well as those from Rawlins and Sheridan counties, Red Willow County, Neb., Culbertson, Neb. and Beaver Valley, Neb., Mr. Cathcart said.

Decatur County commissioners called an emergency meeting (See FIRES on Page 4)



FIREFIGHTERS BATTLED the towering flames (above) at Diane Bremer's 95-year-old barn Tuesday. Just moments later, the structure collapsed. A fire truck (below) exited the smoke of a burning structure north of U.S. 36 on Tuesday afternoon. Dozens of structures, machines and outbuildings were lost to the flames, and for the first four hours, firemen and volunteers couldn't keep up.

— Herald staff photos by Stephanie DeCamp



Family loses barn and more in fire

By STEPHANIE DeCAMP
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The Bremers lost their barn, their machinery building and an outbuilding Tuesday, but their house was saved, thanks to the efforts of the firefighters.

Dianne Bremer said a friend, Mir-la Coleman, called to tell her what was happening in the fields around the home where she grew up.

"It was in full swing by 1 p.m.," she said. "I was just frantic, in shock. I actually thought that everything was gone when I was on the highway. I was afraid it was all burned down. But in the midst of all that smoke, there were the firefighters."

"Luckily, no one was there at the time, and we were away from the house. The firemen were everywhere.... They did an exceptional job. All I could see was big, black smoke coming up from the farm, and we didn't know what to expect."

Ms. Bremer said she'd never seen smoke like that before. Nor had she ever seen her community in action like this before.

"They (the firefighters) were in all night, and coming back to check on us all night. And family, friends and volunteers.... It was just wonderful. All the volunteers, all the farmers, people with water wagons.... it's

just amazing. There were offers of food and help of any kind. Just amazing."

Ms. Bremer said there are two things people should know about fires like these.

"I guess the most important thing to know, especially in the country, is that the people who are out there just sightseeing — they're in the way. They need to stay home and let the emergency people do their jobs. If there's a fire, stay back and let the firefighters deal with it. It's dangerous for everybody when sightseers come out, and there's a lot of congestion on the roads."

"Also, always have a good supply of flashlights and batteries. When you have no power, you can't see in the house to find things, and we couldn't see anything after dark!"

Friends and relatives offered help after the fire, she said, with everything from food to a camper for the family to sleep in that night.

"After it was over, we got so much support," she said. "We had no power or water, and Jay and Becky Tate brought in a travel trailer, a camper for us to sleep in last night so we could have air conditioning, a place to sleep, and power for our cell phones to charge."

"We stayed there because we (See FAMILY on Page 4)

Sale and discharging of fireworks banned

By KIMBERLY DAVIS
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Decatur County commissioners banned the selling and setting off of fireworks in the county during a special meeting Wednesday morning. Later, Oberlin's mayor signed a declaration saying the same thing.

Commissioner Ralph Unger, who had been helping fight a fire near his house and neighbors' property all day Tuesday, said he called for the special meeting.

Tuesday, said Mr. Unger, the fire swept by his home place, destroying fields and outbuildings. Another fire started about 4:30 a.m. by Rod Alstrom's. He said the experience showed him it's imperative to ban all fireworks in the county.

As of Monday, Selden, Jennings and Norcat had banned fireworks inside their city limits, but the city and county had not yet taken action.

The commissioners signed a resolution banning the discharge of fireworks, with a penalty of up to one year in jail and/or a fine of up to \$2,500. Oberlin Mayor Bill Riedel signed an order stating the same.

Mr. Unger said he thought the ban needed to include the annual community display on the Fourth of July, unless a considerable amount of rain were to fall.

Mr. Unger said he talked to Fire Chief Bill Cathcart and he agreed with the ban on fireworks.

Commissioners say thanks to volunteers

By KIMBERLY DAVIS
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The Decatur County commissioners said thanks Wednesday to the firefighters, emergency medical workers and other volunteers for their efforts with the fires Tuesday and Wednesday.

"What I would like to do is somehow commend the efforts of all those involved with the fire department, those assisting and those providing help," said Commissioner Gene Gallentine.

Commissioner Ralph Unger said he knows people bought supplies with their own money, people who dropped off ice chests with ice and water, others who helped.

"Ralph, I know that you were right in the heat of that," said Mr. Gallentine. "Stan made the comment that no houses were destroyed because of those people."

Five houses, said Mr. Unger,

were within 50 feet or less from the fire. At Bill Goss's house, he said, the flames melted the siding. At the Bremer homestead, the shelter belt caught fire and the flames jumped 50 feet or more. The house was saved, but the barn and machine shed were lost.

At Martin May's, Karen Chambers' and Millard Kyte's homes, he said, it was the same thing. The fire burned within 50 feet but didn't get the homes.

"With the grace of God and volunteers," said Mr. Unger, "we lost no occupied residences yesterday."

At his house, he said, they saved a machine shed because neighbors showed up with water and sprayed down the baseboard. They were followed by a fire truck.

"I just can't say enough about everyone's help," he said.

Farmers came to help with semis and nurse tanks. Mr. Unger said he

heard there was even a fire truck from Wray, Colo.

"That shows us what kind of people we have out here," said Mr. Gallentine. "In a time of adversity, they pull together and help out. We need to recognize that and thank everyone."

The only downside was the spectators wanting to see what was going on, said Mr. Unger. They blocked intersections and driveways and slowed traffic.

He said he knew the county water tanker was full and out at the fire several times. Mr. Unger said he knows that several businesses were out with their water tanks, too, including the Decatur Co-op and Crop Production Services. He added that he wasn't sure how many businesses showed up.

Mr. Unger said they needed the county's big dozer to bury alfalfa bales burning at Rod Alstrom's on

Wednesday. A shift in the wind, which could have sent the fires in another direction, was expected.

Mr. Unger said he talked with Fire Chief Bill Cathcart at 2 a.m. Wednesday and they estimated that 7,000 acres had burned. That's roughly 10 to 12 sections, or square miles, of ground.

Mr. Unger said Mr. Kyte called and told him he had lost two and a half miles of brand new fence.

"Do you think this might have been the worst fire in Decatur County?" Mr. Gallentine asked.

Mr. Unger said it has been the worst blaze, in terms of acreage, in his time on the commission.

He said people need to be careful not too pull their vehicles off the road into stubble or grass. It's too dry, he said. A hot catalytic converter could spark another fire like Tuesday's.

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