



A look at how Hurricane Katrina and the Texas wildfires affected Hereford breeders.

by Melissa Leander



Cattlemen count on nature's bounty and blessings for a living. Some days it doesn't cooperate and other days it seems that life couldn't get any better.

In 2005 and 2006, cattlemen were struck down by days that seemed to be the worst hand that could be dealt. Nature's fury devastated the Gulf Coast during Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and ravaged the plains of the Texas Panhandle during the wildfires in 2006.

Through all the destruction, several Hereford breeders have turned loss into hope during the months that followed the life-changing disasters.

How do you prepare?

Chad Breeding, Miami, Texas, of B&C Cattle Co., knew the Panhandle of Texas was in fire danger, but never suspected it would get as bad as it did. Breeding says he has seen winter's bitter cold, summer's

intolerable heat and the recent drought, but not anything like the fires that destroyed more than 1,400 acres of B&C pasture and fence.

Breeding is a volunteer firefighter for Miami. He said he was called out a month before the "big one" to help with small wildfires.

"The winds were screaming at 60 mph around 1:30 p.m. the day of the big fire, and by 5 p.m. the fire had traveled 40 miles," Breeding says.

Though Breeding had known early in the morning of the big fire and its possible effects, he also said he had no idea it would become as large as it did. "How do you prepare for something like this though?" Breeding says of the fire last spring.

Brook (Herring) Gandy, of Punkin Ridge Farm located 50 miles north of the Gulf near Beaumont, Miss., says her family tried to prepare for Hurricane Katrina but it was more destructive than they expected.

continued on page 50 ...



Hurricane Katrina knocked a 52-inch live oak tree onto the home of Halton and Jean Herring of Punkin Ridge Farm, Beaumont, Miss.

Punkin Ridge, which is owned by Gandy's grandfather H.P. Herring, is home to more than 200 Hereford cow-calf pairs and 100 black baldies.

Her family knew there was a possibility of Hurricane Katrina hitting their location near Beaumont three days before it happened. However, no one predicted it would be as bad as it was. "We tried all that we could," Gandy says.

The Herrings gathered oil barrels to keep their farm and greenhouse operation, which contains more than 250,000 containers, running. However, there were limited supplies of oil and they had to fight in line at the local gas station for fuel.

"We'd have to leave our house at 5:30 a.m. to stand in line for up to five hours for two drums of oil," Gandy says.



Cattle find refuge on the porch in Vermillion Parish.



Thousands of acres of pasture and fence were devastated during the 2006 wildfires in the Texas Panhandle.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF BROOK GANDY



Punkin Ridge Farm, which is located 50 miles north of the Gulf, lost two barns, three greenhouses and \$70,000 worth of plants to Hurricane Katrina. Pictured here is the roadway leading to their sale barn and working facilities.

The aftermath

Breeding and his family, who raise 200 head of registered Herefords, tried all they could to help their cattle. In total, the Breeding family lost more than 80 cows and calves and had numerous orphan calves. They continue to deal with udder problems caused by the fire.

"The majority didn't die from the fire," Breeding says. "They were burnt real bad and a lot of them died because of the smoke inhalation and shock of the fire."

The devastation didn't stop there for B&C Cattle Co. They lost every bit of wooden fence and blade of grass, the worst part to lose, Breeding says.

Gandy thanks the Lord that her family didn't lose but three head to Hurricane Katrina; however, they lost two barns and the covering on all nine of their greenhouses. Three greenhouses were completely destroyed.

"It took us a day and a half to get out of the driveway because of the debris that was all over," Gandy says. "There was even a 52-inch tree in the middle of my grandma's house."

We were also without electricity for three weeks, and we had to haul water to our cattle every day to make sure they'd survive, Gandy says.

Gandy's niece, Ashli Cascio, who is a National Junior Hereford Association (NJHA) member, also had extensive damage to her house during the hurricane. In February 2006, Cascio's family moved back into their home to only have it burn down a day later.

"We only had a Bible and a few family pictures left," Cascio says. "It was just so hard to go through all of that."

An outpour of help

Through all the pain and despair, neighbors and other Hereford breeders pulled together to help out the Breeding and Herring families.

"We had an outpouring of support from all over the country," Breeding says. "We had donations from everyone, from the Farm Bureau to our church."

The Texas Farm Bureau set up relief efforts for hay. They sent 100 semitrailer loads of hay from people all over the country that donated to their efforts. There were also numerous feed companies located in the Panhandle that helped the Breedings with range cubes and other feedstuffs. Another outpouring of help came from several fencing companies in Oklahoma, which sold fencing supplies to Texas ranchers at cost.

"All I know is that there is a tremendous amount of good-hearted people out there," Breeding says. "We couldn't do it without them."

On the Hereford side, Michael, Kyle and Drew Perez donated a heifer to the relief fund and the proceeds were donated to Panhandle Hereford breeders.

After Hurricane Katrina, the Herring family saw similar outpourings of help from Hereford breeders including the Tennessee Hereford Association, which donated fuel for Punkin Ridge Farm.

"Neighbors stepped in to help neighbors," says Gandy. "If one of us needed something from town and couldn't get there, a neighbor would go to town."

Life has changed

No matter the devastation during natural disasters, cattlemen find a way to survive. Breeding and Gandy agree that it will be a long row to hoe, but they'll make it.

"There's nothing you could do during this other than turn to your family and the Lord to get through," Breeding says.

He also believes he's learned quite a bit from the devastation. "I know now that when that siren goes off for a fire, it's a drop everything deal," Breeding says. "But I also know that my family meant the first and foremost to me and that cattle can be replaced."

Gandy believes it was the hardest thing her family has ever faced. "I just couldn't stand it, and it lasted for so long," she says. "When one thing was looking up, another thing happened. I do know that our family and others

PHOTO COURTESY OF JESSICA LESTER

PHOTO COURTESY OF TEXAS PARKS AND WILDLIFE DEPARTMENT

should take every precaution seriously and that our family means the most during these hard times.”

For these Hereford breeders and others affected by the disasters the last two years, life has been hard — gut wrenching even — but just as the Hereford breed is known for its hardiness and gentleness, cattlemen will weather the storm and reach out for other cattlemen in need. **HW**



Law enforcement officials evacuate livestock during the Texas Panhandle wildfires in March 2006.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL LEMMONS, AMARILLO GLOBE NEWS

Lending a helping hand

Hereford juniors enjoy helping others in need.

Hereford people are always willing to lend a helping hand. Hereford youth are no exception. Three junior members donated their time and money to help others during Hurricane Katrina and the Texas wildfires.

Helping after Katrina

Jessica Lester, Covington, La., saw the devastation of fellow Louisianans and decided she would help a good neighbor in need. Lester, a junior at McNeese State University in agricultural communications, and her family were contacted by the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association (NCBA) to host a staging area at their home in Covington for troubled southeastern Louisiana cattlemen. NCBA sent supplies to rebuild fences and feed to their home and Lester helped deliver tons of feed to area cattlemen. “I had to deliver feed in 2-3 feet of water,” she says.

Personally, Lester’s family had miles of fence down, trees destroyed and roof damage to their barn due to Hurricane Katrina. Lester said her family was put on voluntary evacuation, but since her family lives so far north from the Gulf, they didn’t evacuate.

“My family prepared by boarding up windows and such, but we will never stay again if this happens. It was like having everything crash down on you,” she explains.

Lester is currently serving as the 2006 Louisiana Cattlemen’s queen. In this role she travels to promote beef at various events. She is also involved on campus at McNeese through her sorority, Phi Mu; Collegiate FFA; Block & Bridle and student government. Lester has been a member of the Louisiana Junior Hereford Association and Cattlemen’s Association for 10 years.

Morgan Firestine, Womelsdorf, Pa., also joined the efforts in helping Hurricane Katrina victims. Firestine, a junior in agribusiness at Pennsylvania State University, donated a heifer, MAP Miss Satin, to be auctioned during the Keystone International Livestock Exposition’s (KILE) National Hereford Sale in Harrisburg, Pa., Oct. 7, 2005.

Her father, Mike Firestine, took his family to New Orleans on a business trip two years ago, and to the Junior National Hereford Expo (JNHE) in Tunica, Miss. After seeing the destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina, Firestine knew she wanted to help, and approached her father about donating the heifer.

“I recognized some of the homes from when I visited and remembered how beautiful they were, and I knew I wanted to help,” Firestine says.

The heifer raised more than \$10,000 for Hurricane Katrina victims and created an opportunity for inner-city youth to learn about agriculture.

MAP Miss Satin was purchased by a group of Pennsylvania agriculturalists, who formed the PA Ag Hurricane Relief Group. The money raised was distributed through the Mennonite Disaster Service.



The Lester family was contacted by NCBA to host a staging area for troubled southeastern Louisiana cattlemen after Hurricane Katrina. Pictured (l to r) are: Ricky, Cindy, Jessica and Brittany.



Texas junior Hereford members gathered T-posts, barbed wire and gloves to help producers who lost fences due to the wildfires. Pictured with bales of barbed wire are former TJHA President Ilissa Nolan, Gilmer, and current TJHA President Erich Schatte, Giddings.

Once the relief group bought the heifer, it was returned back to the auction to be sold again. A group of five cattle farms from Pennsylvania, Connecticut and Massachusetts made the second purchase for \$1,100, and the heifer was donated to the Manatawana 4-H Club in Philadelphia. The heifer is now used as an educational opportunity for inner-city youth to gain hands-on experience raising cattle.

“This is a great example of Pennsylvania’s fine agricultural community reaching out for a worthwhile cause,” says Pennsylvania Agriculture Secretary Dennis Wolff.

Firestine has also been involved in the beef industry by serving as the Pennsylvania Beef Ambassador. In addition, she’s highly involved in extracurricular activities and her community. She is a member of Collegiate FFA, the National Agri-Marketing Association, and Women in Science and Engineering. Firestine is also active in Lancaster Project Needy, an organization that gathers donations and sponsors to help fund Christmas dinner for needy people in Lancaster, Pa.

“I really enjoy giving back to the community and our nation because no matter where I am, the idea that I can reach out to a wider community is very important to me,” Firestine says.

Rebuilding the fence

Another example of young Hereford people aiding cattlemen is the Texas Junior Hereford Association (TJHA).

The TJHA board of directors decided they wanted to help fellow ranchers who had lost fence and cattle due to the springtime wildfires.

Ilissa Nolan, TJHA president, says with the help of their advisors they were able to make their idea a reality at the Texas Junior Hereford Preview Show on June 22-25, 2006, in Belton, Texas.

The TJHA called the project “Please Fence Me In — Panhandle Rebuild,” which gathered more than 300 T-posts, 30 rolls of barbed wire and gloves to help mend the fences that were lost during the wildfires.

Mike Fuston, Turkey, Texas, volunteered to take the supplies to several breeders in the Texas Panhandle.

The TJHA decided to support Hereford breeders in need first, and then other breeders who had lost a great deal. “Our main goal was to help anyone in need. We lost a great deal to the wildfires in Texas,” Nolan says. **HW**



Morgan Firestine donated a heifer to be auctioned at the KILE National Hereford Sale in 2005, with the proceeds going to the aid of Hurricane Katrina victims. Pictured here she is presenting a check to the PA Ag Hurricane Relief Group, which distributed the money raised.