

Out of the Ashes

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ROGER AND JACKIE CHENOWETH



Adams Bros. and Co. Ranch is rebuilding after a wildfire in 2012 engulfed 73% of its acreage plus a calving barn, hay and miles of fence.

by **Troy Smith**

“It was Wednesday, Oct. 17, and shortly after lunch. I was working at the computer when our son called from where he was moving hay bales out of a creek bottom. Ryan said he could smell smoke,” recalls Roger Chenoweth, manager of Adams Bros. and Co. (ABC) Ranch,

near Kilgore, Neb. “My wife, Jackie, and I went to check and discovered a fire about four miles northwest of us.”

Plenty of Nebraska folk can easily recollect the events of that particular Wednesday in 2012. It’s the same day that parts of seven counties were burned

by three separate wildfires, including the blaze that blackened much of the northern Cherry County ranch where the Chenoweth family has lived and worked since 1977. Ignited by a downed electrical power line in South Dakota, the fire reportedly burned some 3,000 acres before



At Adams Bros. and Co. Ranch headquarters the fire claimed a calving barn and the residence of ranch owners Bill and Liz Sharp.

crossing the border into Nebraska and racing across ABC Ranch.

“After we notified the fire department, I cranked up the ranch’s road grader, hoping to make a firebreak to protect the ranch buildings. I couldn’t go fast enough to do much good. I finally had to park the machine and get out of the way,” tells Chenoweth.

“The fire came fast, whipped by sustained winds of about 40 miles per hour, and gusts up to 60. Jackie and Ryan hooked up our (fire-fighting) rig, trying to contain the blaze already burning in the tree grove northwest of Ryan’s house and our shop building.”

It’s common in range country for individual ranches to have vehicles equipped with water tanks, hose reels and pumps for battling grass fires. Many such private rigs soon began arriving, along with volunteer fire departments from the surrounding area.

As the firefighting force gathered, the Chenoweth family and other neighbors focused their attention on moving cattle out of harm’s way.

Due to drought conditions, the ranch was already partially destocked. A month prior, the commercial calves — both steers and heifers — had been weaned and trucked to a commercial feedlot. Chenoweth credits Ryan with forging a plan for evacuating the registered Hereford bull and heifer calves that remained on the ranch. Ultimately, Valentine-area veterinarian Scott Larsen and the Hoffman family of Thedford transported those calves to the Hoffman’s ranch.

There wasn’t time to do more. By the time firefighters stopped its advance, the fire had moved on to the southeast and forced the evacuation of Crookston, Neb. The town was spared, but according to the Nebraska Emergency

Management Agency, the fire scorched a path up to five miles wide and 15 miles long. During the two hours that flames tore across ABC Ranch, the fire burned 73% of its acreage, including rangeland and hay meadows.

Following the flames

The fire claimed the residence used by ranch owners Bill and Liz Sharp, as well as a calving barn, 600 bales of native hay, some haying equipment and miles of fence. Only 11 animals were lost, but they

included nine of the ranch’s best registered Hereford cows plus two recipient cows and the embryo transplant (ET) calves they carried. Also destroyed were four large shelter belts comprised of cedar and pine trees. Some had been planted 50 years previously by the ranch’s founder.

“In an area like this, where shelter belts are important as winter protection, the loss of those trees is terrible,” laments Chenoweth. “They certainly can’t be replaced in my lifetime.”

“Having to start over is hard but, God willing, we will carry on.”



Problems multiplied as, on the day after the fire, ash and dirt were lifted by high, gusty wind and deposited in water tanks and fence rows and around ranch buildings.

On Thursday, the day after the fire, Chenoweth mounted a cow hunt. Challenging the effort, the wind gusted to near 70 miles per hour, stirring dirt and debris into the air and creating near brown-out conditions. Like snow, ash and sand blew into drifts of one to three feet in height. Stock tanks filled with drifting ash. Adding insult to injury, the wind blew the sandy soil away from grass plant crowns, exposed the roots, ultimately causing some plants to die.

Area ranchers Ken and Linn Churchill pitched in to help prowl burned pastures, locating scattered cattle and driving them to where

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Drifts of ash and fine sand collected in shelter belts and fence lines. The fire claimed many of the cedar and pine tree rows established by the ranch’s founder.

The fire occurred in the midst of drought, when it was difficult to find pasture for rent. ABC Ranch herd numbers were cut and only purebred heifers were kept. Herd rebuilding will focus on heifer retention.



320 mature cows plus 40 to 50 replacement heifers. Close to a third of the cows were registered Herefords from which seedstock were produced. About two thirds of the cows were commercial Herefords that were bred to Red Angus bulls to produce red baldies. After considering the amount of grassland

there was water. The men returned on Friday to aid with feeding and getting an accurate tally of animals. Local volunteer firemen patrolled the area for three days after the fire looking for hot spots that might

reignite. The Hoffman family also returned to help clean up around the headquarters area and to watch for flare-ups.

In the days, weeks and months that followed, dead animals

were buried, the two burned-out buildings were demolished and fences were built. Chenoweth and the ranch's owners also planned for the future of the cattle operation.

Typically, the ranch had maintained 300 to

burned and the loss of hay supplies, the decision was made to sell 85 cows from the latter group. Hay was purchased and only registered heifer calves were retained as replacements.

"It was tough to look at the aftermath all winter long — the burned trees and fence posts, and the bare ground with nothing there to catch snow," says Chenoweth. "By April 1, 2013, we hadn't received very much moisture and the pastures were still looking very bleak. In a drought year, rented pasture within a reasonable distance was unattainable."



The fire damaged or destroyed many long-established trees (above) and bales on the meadows were turned to small piles of ash (right). But damage to rangeland continued, due to dry, windy conditions (below).



The perfect storm

It is difficult to make the decision to part with a set of cows so long in the making, to give up the results of generations of selective breeding. But fire, preceded by drought and followed by wind,



had comprised a near perfect storm at ABC Ranch. Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) personnel predicted a three- to five-year recovery period for grass in the most severely affected areas of the ranch. The Chenoweths and the ranch owners agreed that taking care of the land had to be their priority. They would destock further.

“We sold most of the cows and calves, keeping only 65 pairs and our replacement heifers,” tells Chenoweth. “It was a sad day for us, watching the loaded trucks pull away.”

Chenoweth says the operation is now in rebuilding mode. Rain did come, starting in late May. All things considered, 2013 yielded a fair hay crop. Two fencing crews labored last summer, setting posts and stretching wire. Construction of a new calving barn was completed this past February.

“We calved 100 females this spring. It was easier than usual. It was a little bit depressing too, when thinking about the cattle that we bred up for years but had to sell,” adds Chenoweth.

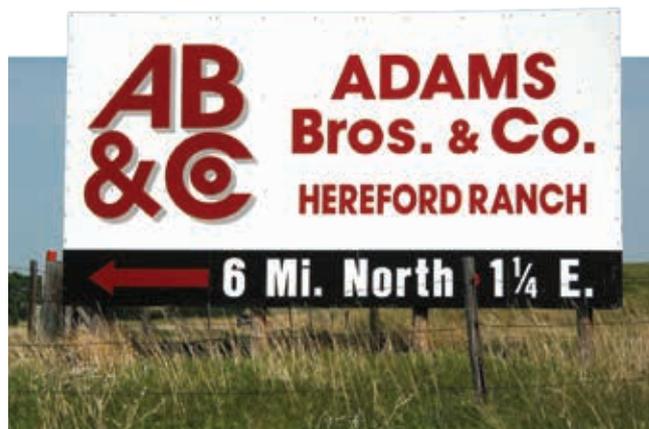
Going forward, the plan calls for careful range management to hasten pasture recovery as much as possible. Chenoweth also plans to keep as many good heifers as possible, breeding them to Hereford sires. His plan depends largely on moisture conditions, but

Chenoweth remains optimistic. He hopes to have herd numbers rebuilt in four or five years. And plans call for establishment of new shelter belts.

“Bill and Liz Sharp and their family are willing to invest the time and money to rebuild the operation,” Chenoweth says. “My family and I have spent 36 years working for Adams Bros. and Co. This is our home and we’re grateful to them. Having to start over is hard but, God willing, we will carry on.”

“We’re also grateful for all the people who came to our rescue. Really, we are blessed. The consequences of the fire could have been far worse. No human lives were lost. Had the fire come at night, we

might not be here to tell the story,” says Chenoweth. “It’s one we’ll remember. The fire started on Oct. 17 — Jackie’s birthday. We’ll always remember the date.” **HW**



Roger Chenoweth says the range is healing now, but it’s a slow process.

