

# Cows and Wildfire



Father and son, Patrick and Ronny Morgan, Burwell, Neb., are both members of their local rural fire department. The truck pictured is 88 R 10, which is stationed at the Morgan Ranch.

*This unlikely combo is a way of life for one Nebraska rancher.*

by **Danielle Beard Hayden**

Nationwide, more than 75,000 wildfires occur each year, reports the U.S. Forest Service. Extreme heat, drought, lightning, human error and arson can be credited as the sources for the variety of wildfires that tear across forests and rangeland, devastating rural and urban communities. For less populated rural areas, members of the community must take on protecting the community from wildfires.

Like Patrick Morgan, of Burwell, Neb., who juggles

working on his family's ranch and teaching high school agriculture with being involved in his local rural fire department.

### **Sparking an interest**

As a kid Patrick first became interested in firefighting from watching his neighbor's involvement in the fire community.

"Up here we have a lot of rural fire departments, because of that we tend to spread our grass rigs around, our neighbors were active with that and always had a truck on their place," he says.

Patrick recalls one large fire in his home county of Loup that he credits as the beginning fuel for his interest toward all things grass fire.

"It probably burned eight miles long and four to five miles wide, it required a lot of pressure and a lot of resources," he explains. "I can remember watching that fire and watching the trucks move in to contain it. That is what gave me my want to start firefighting, from there I progressively tried to learn and grow into it."

According to Patrick, Loup County uses on-the-job training for those interested in becoming firefighters.

“We go out and do prescribed burns to train, we will have an experienced driver, and then have the rookie running the hose. The rookie maintains the hose and this gives those with experience the opportunity to teach how to fan, spray and how to put down a line for the fire as they go along.”

See the sidebar “Prescribed burning,” for more about the process and how it is used in some parts of the country.

Those interested in furthering their fire management knowledge can attend the Nebraska Fire School. Patrick — who served on the Burwell Rural Fire Department for four years and has served the Loup County Rural Fire Department for two and a half years — explains the school conflicts with spring calving and pairing out for summer pasture, so he has not been able to attend.

### Niobrara

While most of his fire experience reflects local grass fires, Patrick was able to assist with the 2012 Niobrara River Fire. The fire, which was caused by a lightning strike in drought conditions, burned an estimated 150 square miles of forest and grassland.

Strong winds, canyons filled with fire’s optimum fuel — cedar trees — and excessive heat, made the Niobrara a difficult fire to contain and one devastating to the landscape, Patrick explains.

“The problem was it was fueled by 40 mile an hour winds, which makes it difficult to keep up with a fire and put out a fire,” he says. “That type of fire you’ve got to fight ahead of it, and that is where a lot of work was involved laying (starting) back fires in order to put it out.”

During the Niobrara, the Loup County Rural Fire Department sent its tanker and grass rig to assist with the fire. Patrick was

*“That is kind of the silver lining of this area and natural disasters like that, everybody is going to pull together and help out where they can.”*

scheduled to run the grass rig, but as it happens, the day he was set to leave was the day the rig was sent home. He did, however, find other ways to contribute in the aftermath of Niobrara.

“I’m an FFA advisor, and right after the fire, Loup County FFA donated \$1,350 to the relief fund to help rebuild fences and buy hay for cattle that were displaced because of Niobrara. That is kind of the

silver lining of this area and natural disasters like that, everybody is going to pull together and help out where they can. Whether it is a small organization of 27 students or a large organization like the Nebraska Cattlemen, they’re going to pull together to help out,” he adds.

### Juggling it all

While he says he strives to be proactive in his work with his county’s rural fire department, it just represents a small part of Patrick’s day-to-day routine.

“I start my day working on the ranch, I help my dad feed and check cows. I work there until 9-9:20, which is when I leave to teach in Taylor.”

In Taylor, Neb., Patrick teaches intro to agriculture, junior high shop, animal science, ag mechanics and wildlife management.

“That gets me to 2:45, and then I’ll come home and we’ll finish up chores and whatever needs to be done on the ranch, which isn’t always early.”

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The Morgan family ranches in the Nebraska Sandhills near Burwell.

In addition to it all, Patrick also serves as the ambulance squad captain for his area.

“As if I need more things to do,” he laughs. “I’m kind of a jack-of-all-trades, but that’s how it goes in a small community; everyone has to do their part to make it work.”

Having the flexibility in his schedule to be a ‘jack-of-all-trades’ stems directly from support at home.

“If it wasn’t for a great family and wonderful wife I could not be able to do all that I do,” he credits.

### Morgan Ranch

Community involvement is something Patrick stresses as

being important, but for him, the family ranch comes first. Four generations currently reside on the family’s Hereford operation located in the Sandhills just north of the Calamus River.

“We all help out and work on the ranch — I do have a job in town — but the ranch lifestyle is what we all work for and try to achieve,” he says.

Herefords have been in the family for decades. Dan and Doris Morgan moved to the area in 1956 to take over the ranch Dan’s sister had acquired in the mid-1930s. With them they brought their two sons, Dan and Ronny. Doris

and Dan eventually had two more children, Jeannie and Jason.

Ronny met his wife, Kay, at the Nebraska State Fair in the winner’s circle — they had both won in their respective breeds — and went on to have four children: Carrie, John and twin boys Roger and Patrick.

“I met my wife, Jessica, during college and we have two children, Clairra, our daughter, is 6, and Chase, our son, is 1,” Patrick adds.

Dan (senior) and his son Ronny selected traits to build the ranch’s Hereford herd to produce show steers and show heifers.

## Prescribed burning

According to the U.S. Forest Service, fire can be good in maintaining a healthy and balanced ecosystem. The right fire, at the right place, at the right time:

- Reduces hazardous fuels, protecting communities from extreme fires;
- Minimizes the spread of pest insects and disease;
- Removes unwanted species that threaten species native to an ecosystem;
- Provides forage;
- Recycles nutrients back to the soil; and
- Promotes the growth of trees, wildflowers and other plants.

Prescribed burning is a common practice used among agriculture producers in certain geographical areas. When grazing cattle, burning off a pasture can be beneficial in the regrowth of high nutrient content forage.

In some parts of the country like the Flint Hills, prescribed burning is a yearly event.

According to Patrick Morgan, ranchers can hire companies to burn off pastures, but all rural fire departments will work with producers in setting up a burn. He advises talking to a local fire chief and finding out if the area requires a burn permit. Morgan also stresses the importance of weather awareness.

For more on prescribed burning, download the PDF at [ksre.ksu.edu/bookstore/pubs/l815.pdf](http://ksre.ksu.edu/bookstore/pubs/l815.pdf). **HW**



The Gracie Creek Landowners Association did a controlled burn as a training activity for the Loup County Rural Fire Department.

Patrick credits a lot of the appropriate selection of herd sires and cows to his father, Ronny.

“To this day, Dad selects a bunch of versatile and solid herd females that we can use with a variety of sires, to produce a show steer or a show heifer.”

Patrick says his family’s emphasis on selecting traits for show cattle has paid off in the showing.

“All of us kids had success in the showing, from Dan and Ronny, to my brother Roger and I, and hopefully in a couple of years my daughter, Clairra, will get to continue that,” he says.

Clairra currently has three bucket calves to take care of, one of which she will show at the Loup County Fair this fall.

“She is growing up like any good ranch kid will,” he continues. “Growing up with chores and knowing there are things you have to do everyday.”

Instilling the value of hard work in their children is important to Patrick and Jessica in order to ensure the next generation of Morgan Ranch.

“We do all our ranch work on horseback, when Clairra was a little younger I put her on an old trusty ranch horse and ponied her along, now she is old enough that even though she is on the same horse, she is in charge of him without me leading. That’s just progression. That’s just growing up on a ranch and learning as you go,” he adds.

Dan (senior) passed away in 1989, but the legacy continues. Doris, her children — Dan, Jeannie, Ronny and his wife, Kay — Patrick, Jessica and now Clairra and Chase, forming the newest generation, all live on the ranch.

“The rest of the kids — Jeannie, Carrie, John and Roger — return to help during branding, sorting, calving and breeding,” Patrick explains.

Along with training the next generation, family members take precautions to uphold the best land management and conservation



The Morgan family works together on the ranch pictured here are Jess, Dan, Clairra, Pat and Ronny.

practices they can. In doing so, Morgan Ranch partnered with neighboring ranches to form the Gracie Creek Land Association, which strives to preserve the natural ecosystem. Their efforts haven’t gone unnoticed and earned them NCBA’s (National Cattlemen’s Beef Association) Region 7 Environmental Stewardship Award last year.

“It’s a great award and we are really proud to have it,” Patrick adds.

### Mixing cattle with fire

Being a rancher himself gives Morgan a deeper understanding of how devastating any natural disaster, especially a wildfire, can be to a cattle producer.

“It affects your cattle production, because if it’s an unplanned fire, it’s taking your forage and it’s binding your hands on what you can do with your grazing rotation,” he explains.

No matter what the style of grazing, Patrick says an unplanned fire leaves the ground bare, potentially putting a producer in a devastating position.

“If you are in the situation where you lose your entire pasture like several ranches up in the Niobrara fire did, you run into the situation of wondering how you are going to feed your herd,” Patrick explains. “That’s a pretty tight spot to be in. You have to either find grass

somewhere, go buy hay and corn distillers or wheat stock. After the Niobrara fire you did see a lot of cattle getting sold.”

Even worse than losing grazing resources to a wildfire is losing cattle. In the event cattle become trapped in a pasture, Patrick says he and other firefighters will start knocking down fences and moving cattle out of the way.

“We know that is the livelihood of the folks out here, and we are going to do what we have to do to save their livelihood. If it means that your cattle get mixed up with the neighbor’s cattle, then it’s not that big of a deal. At least they are alive.”

In order to lessen the threat of complete devastation from wildfire, Patrick advises keeping pastures and fencerows clear of debris and forage at an appropriate height.

“Pay attention, if you see smoke, call dispatch.”

Lastly, he adds, while wildfires can be devastating for any rancher, there is a potential silver lining in rejuvenating pasture growth.

“Wildfires are a natural disaster and can be really detrimental to what you do, but with some planning and perseverance you can come out of it in good shape. It’s very difficult to control a wildfire, you can do the best you can, but it’s called a wildfire for a reason.” **HW**