



NASA TERRA satellite MODIS imagery between July 28, 2020, and Aug. 11, 2020, showing the approximate damage to cropland (outlined) from the derecho that moved across Iowa Aug. 10, 2020. [Imagery courtesy MODIS Today at University of Wisconsin-Madison Space Science and Engineering Center.]

# Weathering the Storm — Iowa's Derecho

**Hereford breeders come together to clean up a storm with destruction so widespread it is seen from space.**

by *Katie Maupin Miller*

**W**hen Craig Jackson rounded the corner leading to his family's Mechanicsville, Iowa, farm, his heart sank. Jackson Hereford Farms has been a cornerstone of the breed since 1890, yet a massive Midwest storm, known as a derecho — a widespread, fast-moving thunderstorm complex with straight-line wind damage — laid

waste to generations of hard work on Aug. 10, 2020. The devastation was so extensive and overwhelming Craig almost looked away.

The family's gabled barn, once a recognizable landmark, was strewn across the road into neighboring pastures and fields, concrete silos reduced to rubble, and grain bins blown several yards away.

The "Home Farm" where Buell and Helen raised the fourth generation of Jacksons, including LeRoy, Ron, Gary, Arlen and Loren. After the storm several of the Jackson family's buildings, barns, silos and sheds were destroyed or heavily damaged. Yet, the houses on the homesteads stood strong.

Craig rode out the freak summer storm at his home in town, but his sister, brother and nephew were all caught in the derecho, and their tales are harrowing. Nicole Jackson Ehler and Brad Jackson met at Nicole's work to finalize some farm paperwork when they received the news that strong winds were on the way. Brad headed to the farm to check on their father, LeRoy, and Nicole rushed to finish things up at the office.

Nicole pulled out of her workplace in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, right as the storm sirens went off; yet the sky was remarkably calm. The brunt of the storm hit when she was on the interstate. Nicole gripped her steering wheel and feared for her life as gusts reaching speeds greater than 120 miles per hour blew for nearly an hour. She'd been on the phone with Brad, and he said things were getting really bad at the farm before the line went dead.

Brad and his nephew, Jacob, had to seek shelter in a house at their middle farm as the wind gusts and debris became too great before Brad could reach LeRoy. As they started down the basement stairs, the door blew open and exploded into a shower of glass. The two huddled in the basement to weather the storm.

"It felt like the house was going to be gone because you could hear the wind coming through the house," he says. "Things were moving; you could just hear it and feel it."

When the wind slowed, Brad went upstairs and was shocked by the devastation he found. He tried to describe it to his brother Brian Jackson, but it was nearly indescribable.

"I remember Brad calling me and telling me it was hard to imagine how bad it was," Brian says. "Until you drive out there to see, you couldn't describe it to me."

Their father, Hall of Fame Hereford Breeder LeRoy Jackson, rode out the storm in his easy chair, but the siblings think a higher power protected him. A grain bin flew between Leroy's home and a barn, scraping the corner of the house, before it came to a rest along the show heifers' pasture fence.

### After the storm

The Jackson siblings surveyed the swath the storm cut through their farm. It leveled several buildings, toppled trees and rendered grain bins and silos unsalvageable. Yet, the oldest registered Hereford herd west of the Mississippi survived unscathed, and the family unharmed.

While thankful, the siblings were overwhelmed with clean up, and then people started calling, texting and showing up. In all, around 60 volunteers helped the family pick up the pieces of their farmsteads, including many fellow Hereford breeders.



Brian, Brad, LeRoy, Craig and Nicole represent the fourth and fifth generations of Jacksons to care for the oldest registered Hereford herd west of the Mississippi. Even after the storm, the sixth generation is ready to continue this family tradition.

Marvin Krapfl of Earlville, Iowa, is a longtime family friend to the Jacksons. The worst of the storm missed his farm, but he was eager to help in its wake.

"I snuck down there, and they were busy with end loaders tearing everything out. I knew I could work alone, where they had some heifers. Nails were sticking up, and the cattle were stepping on them and stuff. I got some tools out of my truck and started cleaning up boards with nails," he says.

Krapfl is keeping one of the family's herd bulls for the winter as the Jacksons rebuild their barns and shelters.

Charly Rife practically grew up with the Jackson siblings, spending hours perched on the family's showbox. He rode out the storm under a scissor lift at a construction site in Cedar Rapids as the wind stripped the metal off the building. Still, he was shocked when he pulled up to Jackson's farm.

"The first thing you noticed when you came up to the homeplace, there used to be a big, grand barn that was sitting there ... but to see it down to the foundation was just mind-blowing," he says. "[The Jacksons] have been around a long time, and ... to see so much history and legacy be taken out at one time is hard to even put into words."

With all of this support, the Jacksons found a way forward. Seeing how many people believed in their family, their cattle and their mission kept them going.

"We grew up with this breed, and we grew up with this farm," Craig says. "It almost looked insurmountable after this storm, and then people showed up and started helping. We decided we can't give up if people won't give up on us. We have to keep going."

One of Nicole's friends set up a t-shirt fundraiser to donate shirts to volunteers who helped the family clean up. They read, "stronger together," which is a sentiment the Jacksons have lived by for the months following the storm.



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Steve Landt's shed was recently rebuilt from a 2014 wind storm, only to be destroyed by the derecho. Due to the widespread damage, contractors and supplies are in short supply, and building costs have skyrocketed in the area.



“The last couple of months have shown me that we are ‘stronger together’ as a family, a community, and a state,” Nicole says. “We are blessed and fortunate to have so many people in our lives who have given hours of their time and energy to help us pick up the pieces (literally). We can’t say or give enough thanks for all the support we have had. I do believe that this will make us stronger and better in the future.”

### In the path

The Jackson family was not the only Hereford breeders in the path of the storm. The 2020 derecho was the costliest thunderstorm in modern history. It affected 3.5 million acres of corn and 2.5



The Heck family lost around 150 trees in the storm. It took several days for the family to clear the debris from their driveway, and Amanda Heck says it could take two to three years to remove the downed trees from their 40-acre farm.



Steve Landt's corn crop was among the 3.5 million acres flattened by the storm. Now, the cattleman wonders if it is safe to turn his cattle on stalks like he usually would. Such management decisions can have a long-lasting impact on producers.

million acres of soybeans in Iowa, and its path of destruction was so broad it was visible from space.

Steve Landt of Union, Iowa, was also caught in the storm on his way home. He had to turn around five times trying to find a way home which wasn't blocked by trees, powerlines or debris. The shed they had rebuilt in 2016 following a 2014 wind was flattened, as were his crops and more than 30 mature trees surrounding his homestead.

The family had to take their car — the only vehicle which was not damaged — through pastures and fields to piece together fences. A neighbor was kind enough to help on a farm they rented. She used panels from her kids' 4-H sheep projects to patch holes in Landt's fence.

In the following days, countless volunteers — friends, family and friends of friends, showed up to help the Landts clean-up from the storm. Unfortunately, during clean-up, they discovered some cows killed by falling trees; yet Landt is fortunate none of his family were harmed.

Although they are on their way to cleaning up, Landt expects the storm to have a “long tail.” Building costs have already doubled in the area due to the widespread damage, and contractors are in short supply. Most say rebuilding will take years, not months.

“All you can do is analyze what happens to you and pick up the pieces of the puzzle,” he says. “We're lucky to be able to do it. Look at people with diseases or something that they can't do anything about it. You have to look at the other side and think there will be a better day.”

Amanda Heck rode out derecho at her pediatric practice in Tama, Iowa. Her typical five-minute commute took more than six times that, as she kept encountering debris in the road. Finally,



Crystal Blin used her social media @CrystalCattle to raise funds and awareness of the derecho's widespread destruction. She also used her hands to pitch in and help people clean up after the storm.

Heck drove through someone's yard to skirt a tree and made it home. When she arrived at their 40-acre farm, she had to leave her car on the road. Their once picturesque, oak-lined lane was all uprooted and unpassable.

While none of their cattle were harmed, the Hecks had around 150 trees down and were without electricity for nearly two weeks. This seemed like an almost unfair blow, as Amanda's father had passed away from pancreatic cancer just weeks before the storm hit. However, the family's faith and the support of so many friends gave them hope.

"I was truly impressed with how many Hereford people reached out to us even more so than our other acquaintances. Even people we only see two or three times a year were reaching out to us," she says. "It says great things about the Hereford organization and the families involved in it."

### With help from friends

When Crystal Blin of Independence, Iowa, saw the devastation on social media, she knew she needed to help. The longtime blogger and ag influencer, @CrystalCattle, took to the Internet to garner support for Iowa farmers with her social network.

"I have repeatedly seen the power of social media. Whether you're growing a business, spreading news or helping a cause, it is an incredible platform that can give you a widespread network," she says.

Blin set up a fundraiser through her Stella & Dot and Keep Collective jewelry business to raise



Crystal Blin and Lyndsy Trotter of Chilled Freezer Meals worked together to deliver 100 meals and gift cards to farm families impacted by the derecho.

funds to help those struck by the storm. Fellow "ag-vocates," including Meredith Bernard @ThisFarmWife, Natalie Kovarik @NatalieKovarik and Angie Supple of @ThePinkPigBoutique followed suit, raising both funds and awareness. Between the women, their online fundraising efforts raised around \$14,000. Blin wrote checks to local groups organizing storm relief and reached out to Lyndsy Trotter of Chilled Freezer Meals to purchase meals for those impacted. In total, the group distributed more than 400 meals to 100 Iowa farm families, proving no task is too large when you have a little help from your friends.

In addition to the online fundraisers, Blin got her hands dirty cleaning limbs in small towns and used beef raised by her and her husband Jon on their Hereford farm, JJB Cattle Co., to feed tacos to 100 people who had also been impacted by the storm. Blin's helpfulness is a reflection of the heart of Hereford breeders and rural Americans across the country.

"I think in general, any opportunity we have to put others ahead of ourselves, whether it is in our day-to-day life or in a tragic event is the right path to follow," she says. **HW**