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FEATURED

Locals lend hands to Panhandle wildfire victims

Izzy Avedesian Special to the Register
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Wildfire risks will persist around Texas for the foreseeable future, according to Texas A&M weather watchers.
CNHI



The day after the largest wildfire in Texas history started, Shelby Smith Baugh and her husband were tucking their kids into bed and praying for some family friends in the Panhandle who were fleeing the fire.

“They were, at the time, cutting their fences so that their cattle could get free,” said Baugh, a Gainesville resident.

“They had moved all their vehicles to a wheat pasture at their neighbor’s place and left their home with what few belongings they could,” Baugh said. “Honestly, I don’t think they expected to see it again.”

Her children, aged 11 and twins 9, helped her see that praying was not enough. Her family began to spearhead relief efforts to the Panhandle.

Baugh called Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service the next day to collaborate a countywide effort with Cooke County 4-H.

“I thought 4-H would be a good way for them to collect the donations and to get other people involved,” Baugh said.

The first weekend after the fire ignited on Feb. 26, Baugh and her family took a caravan of nine trucks and trailers to Canadian in the Panhandle. Volunteers have taken another load since, and contributions are being collected through March.

“Our kids went with us. We had five semi-loads of hay and four pickup trucks with gooseneck trailers that were loaded down with hay, fencing supplies and feed,” Baugh said.

The Baugh family’s shop, Done Right Welding & Construction in Gainesville, has allowed donors to use four acres of their property to drop off supplies.

“Our employees have forklifts so they can get things unloaded easily, so we could store things here and simplify things when it was time to load everything up and send it out there,” Baugh said.

Working with 4-H was a way to get other counties involved and allow people to donate directly to a reputable service and use their donations as a tax deduction. The Cooke County 4-H is still accepting monetary donations.

“I think they felt like a county 4-H program was somewhere they felt could steward their dollars well and make sure they got to the people they needed to,” Baugh said.

The Panhandle region is in disaster recovery from the Smokehouse Creek Fire.

It has been burning for three weeks and has scorched over a million acres. As of Thursday evening, it is 89% contained, according to Texas A&M Forest Service.

In interviews, Texas Agriculture Commissioner Sid Miller has said over 7,000 cattle have died in the fires. Miller also said that the Panhandle region is home to 85 percent of the state’s approximate 12 million cattle.

The fires have created devastating conditions for the ranchers’ grazing land.

Cooke County Fire Marshal Ray Fletcher said he does not know of any local firefighters who have gone to the Panhandle, but several Denton County emergency management workers have contributed.

In the Panhandle, the donations that the Baughs have helped coordinate are helping, but the devastation is vast.

“There’s a whole entire realm of needs they have depending on the location in the Panhandle,” said Sara Allen, disaster assessment & recovery agent for Hunt County’s extension of Texas AgriLife.

Allen said that the greatest needs are for such supplies as hay, livestock feed, fencing wire and milk replacer for the small animals.

Soon after the fire started, Baugh said it was her children that recalled relief work the family had done in 2017, during earlier significant wildfires in the Panhandle. At that time, “we took several loads of hay out there,” and the children said they should do it again.

While the family will continue to keep collecting donations through March, Baugh said their efforts might need to continue. Their family friends who had to flee their home were able to salvage their homestead.

“Farmers and ranchers will have a need for supply for months,” Baugh said.

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