

US cattle ranchers search for feed as wildfires burn grazing lands - Reuters News

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Sentiment:
Mostly Negative 

- Farmers donate hay to feed cattle where fire destroyed pastures
- Cattle supplies set 75-year low due to high prices, drought
- Retail ground beef prices hit record \$6.75 per pound in January

CHICAGO, Feb 23 (Reuters) - Pasture lands have been stripped down to a sea of sand after wildfires tore across the U.S. Plains, killing cattle and wiping out their food sources, and threatening a historically small herd already linked to rising beef prices.

The loss of grass in Oklahoma and Kansas has sent ranchers scrambling for donations of hay to feed their herds as some face the prospect of running out of supplies.

Since last week, the biggest wildfire, the Ranger Road Fire, burned an estimated 283,283 acres (114,640 hectares) in northern Oklahoma and southern Kansas, the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry said on Monday. It was about 65% contained.

"Grass is gone," said Collin Domer, 36, a volunteer firefighter for the Laverne Fire Department in Oklahoma who responded to the blaze.

"It's sand. Take a sand pit and cover that over 285,000 acres."

CATTLE SUPPLIES LOWEST IN 75 YEARS

Other fires have burned thousands more acres in Oklahoma, Kansas and Texas. Some cattle perished, state and industry officials said, without estimating the number.

"There's been a lot of cattle loss," said Bryce Boyer, spokesperson for the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry. "There's been a lot of hay loss. The ones who do have cattle, a lot of them don't have grass to feed them now."

U.S. cattle supplies were already at their lowest level in 75 years after high prices and a persistent drought drove ranchers to send more animals to slaughter, instead of keeping them for breeding. Last year, Brazil surpassed the U.S. as the world's top beef producer, according to industry estimates.

U.S. President Donald Trump has pledged to lower beef costs for consumers. However, retail prices for ground beef set a record high of \$6.75 per pound in January, up 22% from a year earlier, due to low supplies and strong demand from consumers, according to U.S. government data.

CATTLE FLEE FIRE

Farmers cut fences to allow cattle to escape the wildfire last week, though some animals died and others suffered burns after being caught, said Heather Lansdowne, spokesperson for the Kansas Department of Agriculture. Veterinarians were working with ranchers to determine the best care for hurt animals, she said.

"While they were able to save a lot of cattle, those producers now don't have anything to feed those cattle," Lansdowne said.

Once the flames are extinguished, it may take longer than normal for pastures to be ready for grazing again depending on damage from the intense heat, said Michael Kelsey, executive vice president of the Oklahoma Cattlemen's Association.

"That's a long-term issue for some of those ranches," he said. "They've got to give it a little longer to recover."

In the meantime, Domer was spearheading an effort to collect hay, feed and other supplies for ranchers. He said he received donations from as far away as Montana and Michigan.

The Kansas Livestock Association was also coordinating hay donations and said it received offers from Kansas, Wisconsin and Illinois for local ranchers.

"The grass resources have been burned up," association spokesperson Scarlett Madinger said. "They've got to have something to feed their livestock immediately."

(Reporting by Tom Polansek.

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