

Adam Elliott is 41 years old and works for the USDA as part of the conservation service. He also serves as a volunteer fireman. He lives in Ashland with his wife, Trisha, and their three children.

Adam: I am on the fire department, so I started getting pages and IRIS alerts, text messages and stuff like that, about as soon as it was known to Clark County. So, even as it started to occur down in Oklahoma, I was already starting to become aware of it.

Diana: So where you, and what were your first, immediate, reactions?

Adam: I was actually at Dodge City at a government meeting, and I said, "I've got to go." We took off from there probably around noon that day, when I took off from Dodge and headed back to Clark County.

Diana: So, on your way back, could you see the fire?

Adam: We could definitely see the smoke from the south fire. What we didn't expect was that as we were coming down the highway from Minneola, we started to see a second fire off to the east. We called in what became known as the north part of the fire at that point, so that was the part... We kind of expected to see the smoke to the south, but when we started to see that, we actually saw the first part of that fire starting.

Diana: So, when you returned to Ashland, did you get on a fire truck? What did you do?

Adam: I literally got dumped off. I was riding with Heather Grigsby at the time, and she literally dumped me off at the fire station, and I jumped on a fire truck and actually didn't go south to Englewood. We went north and were the first truck to go up to the north part of the fire.

Diana: Who were you with?

Adam: I was with Delbert Waggoner, who was a new firefighter at the time.

Diana: How many gallons of water do you have on that truck?

Adam: About 300 to 350.

Diana: So, where did you end up going?

Adam: We went as far north as we could. If you are familiar with the very north part of the Miller Ranch, we went on up past that. We started our way across, which would be part of Giles', we were on the west side of Young Brothers. We started across then over to the Denton Ranch, where we saw the fire coming at us.

Diana: Did you catch it?

Adam: It was kind of a "meet in the middle" kind of thing. We were literally, we got into the smoke, and at that point, another truck joined us up there with Francis Young. I can't remember who was on the truck with him at that point, so we had two trucks up there, and then Rod Young showed up with a trailer with some water on it. At that point, we were in the flames of the fire as it was headed northeast. We were trying to figure how to cross the canyon to get to the front part of to start to put out the flank fire to just try to get some sort of containment on it.

Diana: So how successful were you?

Adam: Initially, we just were trying to get to a place where we could start to put out the fire. We quickly realized that at that point there was already three to four miles of fire line and that our approximately 1,000 gallons to 1,500 gallons maximum with the water tank wasn't going to get us very far. So, we started to look for what we call "defensible points," anything where we could say, "Okay, if we can stop it at this road..." So

the road that goes up past the west tower out of town going north is where we chose to come back to and just try to keep it from jumping that road. We were unsuccessful.

Diana: While you were there, did the wind change?

Adam: When we were up there, we actually met up with some Minneola fire trucks who were coming down from the north side. They were actually in Bloom fighting fires and had seen that this one had come up. So they were coming, and we were trying to defend along that road and having a little success. I won't say great success. We had kind of prepared ourselves for it and then we knew we were on the north side and so we were driving back and forth through that smoke trying to stop the fire at that point. At the point where we realized we couldn't keep it at the road, we got separated, Minneola being on the north side of the fire and Ashland being on the south side of the fire. I believe even a couple Minneola trucks were on the south side with us too, now that I think about it.

At that point, we started to recognize that conditions were changing. It had already jumped the road and headed on east/northeast from us. We were trying to figure out who we needed to alert. So since I work with USDA, I have a lot of the rancher's phone numbers and I instantly started calling people and saying, "Hey, we don't have this contained and it's coming your direction."

I started calling people right then and there and saying, "Prepare yourselves for this, don't try to fight it. Just defend your properties or do what you need to do. Just make sure you're not in the way when this comes through." We did a little bit of firefighting to just try to keep it contained and headed in a direction out of a couple of wheat fields up in through there. We tried to use the wheat fields to block it and keep it north out of the major rangeland to the south up there. At that point then, the truck I was on started having fuel problems. I'm not sure exactly what it was, the fuel pump on that truck had worked intermittently sometimes on other fires, so I guess it decided that we'd been running it pretty hard there for a while and it started to act up. So it was determined we needed to get that truck back to town so that if something happened to it, we could fix it there and get back out. As we started to discuss sending it back to town, we took off, and there was some confusion as to where we were going, whether we were just headed back to the fire station or whether we were going to go defend properties. At that point, we started to feel the wind shift, so it gets pretty fuzzy right after that because we started to eat a lot of smoke. We took off then down the road to the south. At that point, the wind definitely shifted and caught us as we were going across and coming back down from that north fire.

Diana: Were you on the back or in the cab?

Adam: I was actually in the cab at that point. Both of us were in the cab. We were out of "firefighting mode" and just in "get to the next location" mode. So both Delbert and I were in the truck heading south.

Diana: So did you have any trouble breathing?

Adam: As you look back on things, I've been on fire departments for somewhere around 15 years. I don't remember so much at that point the breathing, though we were eating smoke definitely, but it was nothing much that was a concern. It was when the wind shifted and we got caught that yeah, there was definitely a point where we were like things are definitely difficult. When we were coming back, the truck was sputtering and stalling. Looking back, was that because of the fuel pump or was it because of lack of oxygen? It is hard to say. I can tell you that when the flames did go over us, there was definitely a feeling of, "I'm not sure if I'm breathing or not right now."

I'm not sure if that was shock or actual oxygen deprivation or what it truly was, but yeah, at that point it was definitely a feeling of, "Oh my gosh, it's just hard to breathe!" Again, looking back on it, I'm not sure what it actually was.

Diana: So did you come all the way back to town?

Adam: We ended up making it back to town. The truck gave us some problems, but we ended up all the way back into town, and we left that truck at the fire station. I called and said, "Hey, this truck is not running." We barely got it there and then couldn't get it restarted and ended up sitting on the west side of the fire station. At that point, we were getting reports from everywhere. The radio was literally off the wall with chatter because we had firefighters to the north, down in the south yet. When the wind shifted, it all broke loose at that point.

I jumped onto 53, which is not normally a grass fighting truck. It is reserved; it is actually our emergency response extraction vehicle. We go out on wrecks and stuff like that, but it does have 600 or so gallons of water on it, and it's got a good pump and everything on it so we can use it for structure fires. We quickly just kind of converted it over to a brush rig by taking some of the long lines that we normally fight structures with and shortening them down so that we could fight right off of the truck. We were trying to go north of town to get to the structures. We tried to get to Young's. We were unsuccessful getting there, the smoke and flames got too thick before we could get to that one. So we remained the rest of the night on the north and the east side of Ashland. We spent the remainder of the time, I guess, from I'm going to say somewhere about 4:00 to the next morning... at some point in there, we were able to say that we had it stopped on that side of town and helped out in other parts of town. Yes, I would say that for a good 12 hours, the majority of my time was spent going between the firehouse for water (where we had to refill) and going all the way out to Kaltenbach's and on the Lake Road headed up that way and then out to the cemetery and then on the east side of town by the park and all that.

Diana: Did you go west to Gardiners?

Adam: I was not a part of that effort. Spare's was about... that would have been... we didn't even make it quite as far over as that. If you know where Tony Maphet's shed is, that would have been as far over as we were going. We knew that there were trucks fighting that part over there. So the decision stood. That was one thing that happened that night; I don't know if we got lucky or well-trained, but we all knew where we needed to be to make things happen. At one point in the evening, we lost all radio communication. The repeater went down, the tower went down, so unless we were close enough to talk truck-to-truck, we just left messages back at the fire station about where we were.

Diana: Who was on your truck?

Adam: At that point, Delbert had jumped over and he was trying to work on 52. He jumped onto another truck, I'm not sure which one he jumped on to, but Tim Miller, who was, again, new to the fire department, jumped on the truck with me and he drove that truck as we went out to those areas.

Diana: Were you successful in saving some houses?

Adam: We were successful in some houses. I won't say we were successful in all. We were able to save Regeir's, out there where Lucas Regeir lives, and John Kellenberger's house. We can say that we saved those two. Later on in the day, it wasn't as successful. It was out on Dave Bouziden's house, and we lost that one. So yes, I wouldn't say that it was a successful evening, but yes, we did save the fire from creeping back into town or coming into town on that northeast side. We were able to save some of those rural residences out there; I guess Kaltenbach's was another one out there.

Diana: So, during that time from 4:00 to, say, midnight, did the wind go down?

Adam: It did to some degree, but you have to remember, it was the difference between 60 miles an hour and 40 miles an hour, maybe even 30 miles an hour. To say that the wind had died down was definitely not the case. To say that it had reduced its vigor... maybe. Definitely, the initial blow that went through was unbelievable to me. Again, I've fought fires for quite a while, but when that first came through there was no stopping what was going on. At least as the sun went down, the winds came down to a level that we were used to fighting. Out

here, we fight a lot of fires at 30 to 40 mile an hour winds; we understand fire behavior at that level, so we were able to do some things because we knew how it was going to react. We were able to prepare ourselves and say, “Okay, we know the fire’s moving at this speed, and we need to be at this residence right now. We’ll let this fire get a little closer to this one, and then we’ll put it out.”

Diana: So did you foam houses?

Adam: We did. We did have foam, and we did foam houses and yards in some instances to go through. Kellenberger’s and Regier’s were foamed. By the time we got out to Bouziden’s, that was actually later on that morning, he had been out there and checked it. In fact, I believe the other fire truck had been out there and checked it, and everything was good. But something had sparked up, and at that point, we had jumped out. We were out of foam, if I remember correctly, on our rig. We just started spraying water. But by the time we were able to go through and hook up and get water going, we just didn’t have enough pump power to put that one out. That was a sad one; that was tough to do. So it’s hard when the owner of the house is standing right there, and he’s, of course, worried about all his cattle right just behind the house there and the ones that were dead and dying out in through there. By that point, it was starting to become daylight, and they were already shooting cows right out in the pasture beside him. For that house, there were literally guns going off out in the pasture putting down the suffering animals, and then his pile of ammunition in his house is going off as we’re sitting there trying to do it too. It was kind of a funny thing when you start to hear gunshots going off here, and gunshots over here and you’re in the middle of it trying to put out a fire.

Diana: So did the temperature change throughout the night?

Adam: It did. It definitely cooled off some. I won’t say that at any point I stopped breaking a sweat. I was hot all night long as we moved around. We were physically moving that much and the gear we were in.. I remember sweating all night long and being very dehydrated the next day even though we were trying to keep hydrated.

Diana: So when you went back to the firehouse to fill up with water throughout the night, did you run into other firefighters and hear where they were or what was going on?

Adam: Yes, kind of a general gist. I went through earlier in the evening, or actually that afternoon when they were talking about evacuating, right before they talked about evacuating Ashland. I had talked to my wife and said, “I know where this fire is to the south, and I know where this fire is to the north. I want you to grab some of our belongings and get to the fire station.” So most of my family (my oldest daughter, Alida, was actually at a scholar’s bowl meet, so she wasn’t in Ashland) so my wife and two other kids went down to the fire station. So all night long, I guess I was one of the fortunate ones to know that at least my family was safe, or most of my family was safe. I assumed that my oldest daughter was safe because she was well away from the fire. So I talked to them throughout the night, and my wife actually gave me updates on people she talked to as they came into the fire station and some of the radio chatter she heard from the police department and stuff like that over the radios there in the fire station.

For the most part, though, I won’t say that I was too in tune with what was going on throughout the fire. I kind of had an understanding what was going on through the Ashland fire station. But what Minneola was up against or any of the Oklahoma crews or anything like that, we didn’t truly know how big it was at that point. We knew it was extensive, but we didn’t know how big at that point.

Diana: So you mainly stayed on the north and east of town.

Adam: Yes, because of the timing of me getting back and where I was and everything, that’s the area that I stayed in.

Diana: So were you there when the sun came up? Were you still in that part, or had you switched?

Adam: Yes. I was still in that northeast part of town. I was kind of widening my range as we felt comfortable with the parts of it that were truly out and that we had created a truly safe buffer against the fire in town. We started to widen out and went a little bit further south and went towards Carolyn Degnan's house and then over towards Bouziden's when we saw they were having some problems there. But that's mainly the area that I was in during most of the fire.

Diana: So did you take a break sometime Tuesday?

Adam: Tuesday? You'll have to remember that it all blends together, of course. March 7, no, as far as I remember, I fought fires there. I did take some time to go into my work at USDA and just put out some quick emails to let them know that the office was secure and that I was going to start doing damage assessments at that point. Then I did check in with what was starting to become the Incident Command Center with Millie Fudge there, to let her know where I was and what was going on out that way. So, no, I won't say I took a break on Tuesday. I went from that, and then we started doing the spot fires, going out and about throughout the county and kind of started spreading that out. It was still mainly east. I didn't actually ever go over to the west, I focused more on the east side and went as far down as Frank York's house down in that area, and made it all the way down to the Bouziden's down on the creek, the rivers, down there. I didn't make it as far as Snake Creek. The bridge there was probably about as far south as I went. I fought fires there at all of those and was there at Frank York's when the flames pushed through it. You know, flames throughout the day when the wind would shift a little bit, and the wind would pick up, and it would catch a new chunk of grass, and we'd have a head fire coming through there.

Diana: So, when did the first help besides Coldwater come that you're aware of?

Adam: I never actually saw Coldwater. Where I was, Coldwater wasn't even there. So it was noon the next day when I remember saying, "Hey, somebody else is here." That's the first time that I remember saying, "Okay, somebody else is here." But past that? No, I can't say that we had a whole lot. And that was just a couple of trucks that I remember. It wasn't until later that afternoon and evening that we really started to see what I would call reinforcements or people there to truly start to contain or control fire.

Diana: So did you get any meals on Tuesday?

Adam: Throughout the night, my wife made sure that I had snacks and water and everything like that. Boy, I don't remember. We ate something!

Diana: Did you get the breakfast burritos that they brought from McDonald's?

Adam: No, I don't remember seeing any of those.

Diana: Did you get any hamburgers that United Wireless cooked?

Adam: I don't remember seeing any of those either. Again, because at some point we were pretty much just out in the countryside.

Diana: Nobody brought you food?

Adam: Well, they probably didn't even know where we were, to tell the truth. We were kind of just still in chaos mode or crisis mode at that point, so it was literally a landowner saying, "It's coming up on my farmstead, get me somebody here." I won't say it was contained, but we would feel like we had stopped it from hitting one place and then we'd jump to the next place and defend there for a little bit until we were told to move somewhere else.

Diana: Were you mostly using water? Or using some foam?

Adam: At that point, I switched trucks again that morning after we had pretty well secured Ashland. I jumped on a truck, probably 54 or 56. It was one of the five-tons, with Jeremy. I was actually on old 56 for a little bit that night with Dan Pearce. Whoever was with him had jumped off for a little bit. So at some point in the evening, I can't tell you when it was, but it was still dark, I jumped over for a little bit on the west side with him while 53 was filling up. I went out with him on 56 because the flame was coming in on the hospital. So we jumped out on that and took care of that, and then a little bit on the south side of town where the flames were coming in. I had kind of forgotten about that part, I guess.

Diana: Did you get to help put out the utility poles that bring electricity into town out there on the dump road?

Adam: No, I didn't get out on any of that. That was already pretty well taken care of.

Diana: So when did your radio contact get better again? Was it Tuesday or Wednesday before they got the radios back up?

Adam: I can't honestly tell you at what point we did get radios. We were still communicating. Some of the trucks, like 53, did have the 800 radios. So we had some incoming traffic, if you will, coming in off of that, but we didn't get on that to really call out or do anything with that. We were basically just listening when we were on 53. Again, that was just between as we were driving back. When we're in active firefighting mode, it's kind of hard to actually tell what was going on. So we did have some communication on that radio. On 54, I don't remember at what point we were able to start contacting back. I know we were using cell phones some, but even that was hard to do with busy circuits and those kinds of things and the different parts of the county that we couldn't receive service. So sorry, that part is a little fuzzy.

Diana: So did you get some downtime on Tuesday? Did you get to go home and go to bed?

Adam: No, I don't think I did. I was pretty much on a truck most of Tuesday. So I would say that it was probably that evening when I finally went through and said that some trucks were showing up from different places and different things like that. So on Tuesday night... no, I went in to work! After I got off the fires and everything like that, if I remember correctly, I went home and got cleaned up and then went in to start emailing out and letting people know what was going on and started to report some of the damage that I had been seeing and how widespread and what kind of damage I was seeing.

So, I didn't sleep Tuesday night either, if I remember correctly. I was still very well adrenalized up and didn't sleep Tuesday night. So then, Wednesday morning, I went back to work. At that point, whether it was a good decision or not, I basically loaded up a bunch of provisions in the back of my Suburban and headed off to the ranches that I knew. One was part of just my job to do assessment to see what kind of help was going to be needed and what kind of damage was out there. I was trying to get a good handle on how many animals had died. That was part of what I did. That was part of why I went to Incident Command at some point and said, "Hey, I'm going to be out. Is there anything you need?"

I was kind of tasked with that and trying to figure that out. So I had a lot of people calling me about the number of deads and different things like that. I headed out north, where I knew about mass casualties on the animals and was really trying to assess whether we needed to bring in major equipment for burying them or doing incinerations or anything like that. I was determining if it was a true mass casualty event or not. I determined it wasn't. I still saw a lot of dead cows. I took my family with me; to this day, my four-year-old son still remembers and talks about the dead cows. It was definitely a memorable day, and above and beyond that, it was memorable just because of all the people we knew out there and to see what they were going through.

Really, at that point, people were starting to come back to recognize that they were human. But it was still a very shocking event. I remember at one point I did have to load my family up because we were out up by Giles' on Young Brothers and Wildlife and Parks was out there with their rifles. As fast as they could load them up, they were shooting their rifles and dropping cows. That was kind of a tough thing to see, a bunch of baby calves and a bunch of cows and to figure out what they were going to do from there.

Diana: So were you involved in the burying too? The categorizing and that?

Adam: No, that was mainly on the veterinarians. They were out there to identify the dead ones and to figure out what they needed to do with them. For the most part, after that, I became tied up a lot with just reporting what was going on out there. I started to work on recovery efforts, to really go through and say, "What do we need here? And where do we need it?" So with that, I spent a lot of time on the phone and behind a computer. I'm going to say that when I came back in late Wednesday, I spent the rest of that day and evening at work just going through and saying, "This is what needs to be done." Then, Thursday was pretty much the same. It was just doing assessments and trying to figure out how many houses and how many agricultural buildings, how much damage there truly was out there and reporting that night. So the rest of that week was pretty much that same routine. Somewhere in between there, I did get out and just help some of my friends with some of their stuff. I won't say that I was a whole lot of help.

Diana: Who did you send the reports to?

Adam: Most of that went up through the Conservation Service, through just my chain of command. I was working directly with the Farm Service Agency, FSA, to get them reports on damage, too.

Diana: So you did stuff like fences?

Adam: I reported on miles of fence damaged, number of outbuildings damaged, agricultural equipment damage, number of cattle that had been killed. Again, I was just trying to get some rough estimates on it.

Diana: So after Tuesday, you were back to doing your job instead of being a fireman?

Adam: For the most part. I don't remember hopping back on a firetruck after Wednesday, so yes, after Tuesday I shifted gears and felt that by that point we had started to get enough people in so that the situation was starting to get under control. The better place that I needed to be was back and coordinating all of that stuff.

Diana: What's your most vivid memory of the fire?

Adam: To say that anything is vivid about it is kind of a misnomer. It was a pretty blurry picture throughout the whole thing. If anything, I had worked a lot of natural disasters in my past. I don't know if you want to call it a memory, but the thing that stands out to me was the speed at which everything happened. Just to say that I'd never fought a fire like that and just how conditions changed so quickly and how we went from, "The fire is here," to, "The fire is six miles away," and not being able to have any control over that, and not even knowing exactly where the fire was. The speed, or how fast it expanded and everything, is definitely vivid in my mind. Any fires in the future, I'm definitely going to think twice about the potential of how far and how fast this can go. It gave me a new spectrum out there; it broadened the horizon on how fast things can change.

Diana: So probably in your line of work, you've been involved with some controlled burns, and because you've been a fireman, you know what wildfires are like. Is there anything to compare to this fire?

Adam: Well, I'll give a little more background. I used to do emergency response for the EPA. I was a hazmat guy, so I did even tire fires, which are a thousand times hotter and definitely uncontrollable. You can't put enough water on those things. I had been involved with lots of hazardous waste spills and everything like that,

so I had not been involved in something like this. To say that even my background could have prepared me for what was going to happen during all of that, would be a lie. There was just nothing to say. You can't even warn people fast enough when you've got winds like that. I figured it up, that fire line up north was maybe 13 to 15 miles long when the wind shifted. In a head fire of 13 to 15 miles on fuels that burn within a couple of seconds with 60 miles an hour wind, those aren't conditions you can train in or even consider when we're talking about fires.

Diana: So it was going like this, and then when the wind hit, it went like this?

Adam: It literally was just a short, narrow fire up there on the north. You know, maybe a half-mile wide. But with the wind from the southwest pushing it, it moved very quickly across the north side of the county. When the wind shifted then, it went from a very narrow fire to a flank fire on the south that became the head fire and pushed through. That's why we had so much loss on the north side of the county; there was just no escape. I mean, it was a consistent wall of fire the entire way through there. And it was moving at a speed that none of the rest of us had ever trained on or been involved with.

Diana: What was your emotional response to the fire?

Adam: To tell you the truth, I had a saying during it and for the next several weeks and even up to three weeks after, people would ask, "How are you doing down there?" And I said I described it as the "Fire Drunk." That is, that whatever you are when you've had too much alcohol, was kind of how people were acting down here and how I'm acting. There were people who when they're drunk, they like to fight. We saw lots of fights throughout town. Some people coped with it by getting aggressive and mad.

We had people who cried. Heather Grigsby, the lady I work with, at the drop of a hat, she would cry, for the next three weeks. Other people, Sheryl Golden, who worked in the office, was giggly and bubbly and almost to the point of insanity. When someone mentioned the fire, she would laugh. So I likened it to whatever personality you were whenever you drank too much alcohol, so imagine being drunk for three weeks. For me, I become very withdrawn, I become very philosophical even when I'm drunk, so I think that's what I was maybe to the point of fault, withdrawn and really focused on my work and what needed to be done. That was the way I coped with it. I won't say I had the response of rage or the response of sadness or anything like that, but the emotional response of withdrawal, that was how I coped with it.

Diana: So who were some of the people or agencies that were most beneficial in helping?

Adam: Really, in the fire containment itself, those first 12 to 24 or even 36 hours, that fire was uncontained and the agencies that were involved with that were really just the fire departments that came in and had people there at that point. After that 36 hours, and definitely after 48 hours, the fire was pretty much not an issue anymore. This thing was done and over with within 24 hours. Not over with, but definitely the destruction part of it. There were still parts burning in the river and small things here and there after 36 hours. The most beneficial were the trucks that showed up within that first 12 to 36 hours. We didn't have very many of those, but those that did show up were definitely appreciated. We wouldn't have saved as many things as we did we wouldn't have had them here. After that, things kind of went federal, if you will. There were a lot of people who came in and did their part. I won't say that anyone was more important than any other. They all played their little parts and went on with life.

Quickly after that, it was just the recovery people. Volunteers started to play a part, those initial volunteers that started in to help clean up a few things for some of us who were working to take over parts of our lives. They'd say, "You don't need to worry about this. We've got this covered." I would definitely say those groups coming in. After that, I think it really shifted to how and where the recovery was going to come from. I think our agency did start to play a big part in giving people some comfort in knowing, "Okay, these things are covered and we can repair that." I don't know past that. Everybody went the way that they wanted to. I know a lot of



people relied on some church groups. With other people, it was outside funding sources through electronic media. The help came from everywhere. If there's one lesson, it's don't be so narrow-minded as to where you're going to get your help from. You never know where someone's going to come from to help you.

Diana: Did you have any contact with the volunteers that came? The hay and that type of stuff?

Adam: Initially, at the end of that first week, there was a group that got together to try to coordinate what the recovery was going to be. It was kind of an ad-hoc group. I believe it was Kendal Kay who kind of got it all together. I went to the initial meeting of that and was kind of tasked with fencing supplies. That quickly turned out to be something of contention for some people. They didn't want me being, "In control," was the word they used. They didn't want me coordinating that. They felt that my part as a federal government official would bias me and there were some people who were very vocal and very adamant that I shouldn't be involved in that. Nonetheless, my name was already out. My name had already been put on a bunch of websites. Yes, there was a lot of fencing supplies that were coming in. My main coordination was just to get them here and get them to a place where they could get those supplies out to people.

I didn't have anything to do with whether the supplies went to this person or to that person. It was just to kind of get them into town and get them to the church camp so they had a place to stay. Or even just directly to ranchers so they could meet. One thing I have a memory from this is going to be how much people want to hand it to the person that needs it. They don't want to just give to an ambiguous agency. They don't want to give cash; they want to hand what they've got to that person that needs it. That is a good thing; a good feeling, when it works right. It can also be... some people are, quite frankly, a little picky about how they do stuff. So some people who were in need, some people wouldn't give to them because they made some judgment call on it. So it was interesting to see that response from people, and to see the response from people who were truly in need who didn't want to take stuff initially. They were just like, "No, no." So, just kind of interesting that way.

Diana: Did you have any involvement in helping them receive that aid? I mean, like, helping them change their attitude?

Adam: No. For the most part, like I said, I was a little withdrawn during that first three weeks. So I really did just focus on making sure that we were getting the aid into the county, be it through federal aid or volunteers who were bringing stuff in. Then of course, I've talked about a lot of professional stuff, but on the personal side, through our church and going out. The people who were impacted were producers that I work with every day. A lot of them are my friends. It was more just making sure that they were still okay from day-to-day. When the professional part ended, the personal part kicked in. That's happened up until... It's still happening, I would say. At the end of the day of one job, you move over and do your volunteer positions. You say, "Okay, this is still what still needs to happen with this."

Diana: So did you go take advantage of the food down at the camp? Or did you go mingle with the volunteers down there at all?

Adam: No, like I said, at that point, after those first couple of days, most of my stuff was simply on the phone. I won't say that I took as many phone calls as like Ashland Feed and Seed, and some of those guys did, but basically, my phone was on my ear for the next three weeks.

Diana: Who were you getting calls from?

Adam: Part of it was just producers in the county, getting information about what was going on. A lot of people were asking questions about whether help was coming and what was coming in. A lot of volunteers saying, "This is what we've got. What do we need to bring in to you guys? What do you guys need as far as fencing supplies or hay or anything like that?" Through my contacts throughout the state, there were just a lot of people who had my phone number and started calling me right away. After that, it was making sure that we

had people to staff our office. At that point, there were three full-time employees, four full-time employees if you count Heather, but she was not there because of the damage that had occurred at her place. Sheryl was even off a little at that point, so at some points, there were just two of us in the office. So coordinating more people to come in and help and to start taking people's names on what their needs were and what kind of help we needed to get to them. So we started just doing a lot of coordination efforts.

Diana: So do RCD (Rural Conservation District) and FSA (Farm Service Agency) work together a lot?

Adam: Yes, what usually happens is they are the administrative and the financial side of things, and we're the technical side of things. So where some people say, "Oh, we're about through this fire." For me, I'm still doing a lot of technical work with it. Today, I was out checking fences and looking at cover crops and tree rows that had been burnt out and seeing how we're going to clean them up. That work is going to be on-going for the next year. So most of that gets reported back to the Farm Service Agency, especially as people complete stuff. I give them what needs to be paid on and how much they'll get paid.

Diana: So people have taken advantage of the program to replace their fences?

Adam: To replace fences, tear out windbreaks that were damaged, shelterbelts, repair water supplies...

Diana: Then the conservation district goes out and checks to make sure?

Adam: The Conservation Service? Yes, it meets a certain minimum specification whenever there are state or federal dollars tied to it, people want to know that they're getting what they're paying for.

Diana: So do you have a lot of people helping do that?

Adam: Right now? Today there were five people who were down helping checkout fences. One week I had seven people. That's probably going to dwindle down as we get caught up a little bit, it will go down to just a couple of people. But that's going to be their main task over the next, I'll say, the next six months at least, just going out every day and looking at the fence that's being repaired.

Diana: Are these people that are close to Clark County?

Adam: Some of them. They're agency people from Greensburg, from Pratt, from Liberal, Hugoton, Wichita, Newton, Hutchinson... Those are the main areas people are coming from.

Diana: So has a lot of the fencing been completed?

Adam: I'm going to say that we're probably at about 60 percent, maybe 65 percent at this point.

Diana: What about windmills? Was there a lot of damage to solar tanks and stuff like that?

Adam: In this fire, anything that could burn, burned. So the ember load on this fire was unlike anything I had ever seen. That fire was moving so fast that actually, the flame would catch the grass or the tree on fire, but the wind was so strong that it wouldn't just burn where it was at, it picked up that burning material and sent it flying through the air. So anything that that hit then became where that fire started. That's why we lost a lot of structures and vehicles and whatever else out there, so many hedge posts. That ember load just embedded itself right into whatever was out there. Even like the solar panels, anything plastic on them that the embers could hit and potentially catch on fire, they burned up. The fiberglass tanks, if they had a bunch of weeds around them that all burned up, a lot of our windmills had just little wooden posts driven into the ground that they were tied to, so when those burned off the windmill fell over. There were even still some wooden windmills still out there, and they all burned up. So yes, anything that could catch an ember was a potential... it burned up.

Diana: So, is the financial effect or the physical effect of the fire worse?

Adam: I have the perspective, I mean, I work with the natural resources, the grasses and the soils and the wildlife throughout the county, pre-fire. I often tell people that this was not necessarily a natural disaster. This was something that happens in nature. It was definitely a ranching and farming disaster. It definitely impacted the infrastructure of the people out there. Nature will heal itself, and in fact, it has done a pretty good job this year. We've had a lot of the grasses have already come back. The trees are going to be a little slower coming. Then in some places, nature said that out here on the prairie, trees aren't supposed to be out here. So it was kind of an event that showed you, "Ha. This is what nature would do if trees were out here."

It was definitely a devastating event for the farmers, the ranchers, the producers, the people who lived out here. Nature will recover and be okay. It will take a little time; there is definitely some damage when you have that intense of a flame. Then the dry period afterward where we had so much blowing dirt and sand and ash for up to three weeks afterward until we got that first good rain. That did do some damage out there, so it will take a couple of years. We'll probably see the scars on the trees for decades out there. As you drive down the roads, if we don't cut down some of those big trees, they're going to be standing for quite some time as a reminder of this fire.

Diana: What about shelterbelts? Did we lose a lot of shelterbelts?

Adam: Yes. Most of those were total losses anywhere where the head fire went through. As you go through the Englewood area or anywhere those shelterbelts where, yes, they were pretty much total losses. A lot of those trees aren't coming back, either. So they're going to just be standing relics there for a while.

Diana: Do they bulldoze them?

Adam: A lot of those trees are so big that if you try to do it with a bulldozer, you're just going to end up with a big old tree sitting on top of you. In a lot of instances, they're having to go in with a track hoe or an excavator and grab the tops of those trees and break them over. Then you can bulldoze or do something with them. Sometimes if you just hit on the bottom of them, there's so much weight on the top of them that there isn't much you can do. Nature is already starting to tear them down, with the high winds we've had. I'm sure a couple snowfall events, and we'll start to see... they'll be falling for the next decade.

Diana: Can you perceive anything positive that has resulted from the fire?

Adam: Again, from the natural side of things, fire was always a part of the prairie out here. So it was definitely... after the drought, we started to get some rains and see some recovery. After the initial fire, nature really took off. Wildflowers, insects, dare I say snakes and reptiles, the small mammals were back within a couple of months and prolific, if you will. I mean, they were everywhere. The larger mammals and everything are coming back too. Nature is definitely going to have a positive impact from this fire. You found out who were your friends and who you could trust and who you could rely on during this. Maybe that's a positive and a negative. There were definitely some friendships lost during this. There were some friendships that were set in stone over this because people were there when you needed them to be. That might be with their hands and might have been with their hearts. Those friendships were either broken or deepened because of this whole thing. It definitely puts you in the perspective... they often play that philosophical game of, okay, you only have ten minutes to grab what's important to you out of your house. Well, it wasn't a game this time. It was, "What's important to you? Who are you going to call? Who are you going to make sure is safe? What is so important to you that you're going to grab it and load it up and take it away because you're going to lose everything." So that's a mind changer for you, what is truly important in your life and what isn't, and what you can lose and still be who you are and keep the things that you truly wanted to keep.

Diana: Did you go to any of the meetings afterward that kind of tried to put together what happened, how it happened and what we did right and what we did wrong? Or any of the ones where if you're needing counseling?

Adam: I was meeting'd out over this thing because the federal government loves to have meetings. So every time somebody new walked into town, congressman or whatever, I was at that meeting, so yes, I can't even tell you how many of those meetings I went to. Being on the fire department, we had a lot of debriefings and trying to figure out what had gone on and everything. I tried to make it to as many of those meetings as I could.

But yes, the Iroquois Center, I talked to that lady. Once right after the fire to just say, "What are going to be the responses?" Just to kind of get... as I was out working with people, "What am I going to expect? Or what should I expect?" Afterward, it was telling her and getting some feedback, because, to me, telling her what I was seeing was kind of my way of dealing with things. "This is what people are doing." It gave me a perspective on what I needed to do in my own life.

Diana: When you went to the meetings with the congressmen and senators and the governor that came through, what were their reactions to the fire? Did they... or did they mainly listen?

Adam: A lot of them, of course, want to be empathetic and want to say, "We understand." I don't know that they truly could grasp it either. I mean, to walk in... I did one tour that I gave for a large group of people, about 30 people, from across the state. They came down, and I started on the very north part of the fire. I said, "This is where the fire started." We looked across to the next ridge over, and I said, "This whole area burned." And they were saying, "Oh my gosh, I can't believe how big this was."

Then I talked about some of the homesteads and losing those and the number of cattle that died. You know, from where we stood to the next ridge over. So then we all got in our trucks, and we drove, and I showed them some houses. Then we get back up on the next ridge, and I said, "What you've seen now, is less than 1/6 of what the actual fire was." Then I had them look south from Mt. Jesus (that was where we stopped), and I had them look south at the remainder of the fire. I will tell you it was silence at that point because people could barely comprehend the little piece, the 1/6 or seventh or whatever little fraction of the fire that I had shown them, it was bigger than anything they could even comprehend. Only by driving through it and talking about it could they start to get a sense of the scope of that area. Then when I told them the rest of this also went, it was pretty much mind-blowing. It took them a while.

I would receive phone calls, I still do, from people who were just like, "Man, when you showed us that, when you were talking about it, I'm just now starting to understand what had truly gone on." When I showed them a cottonwood, and you see flame marks 45 feet in the air on it, unless you see that tree and truly understand that the flames coming through were at that height, you can't truly comprehend a flame or fire that big. So to say that they did their best to understand what was going on down here, yes, most people came down here because they wanted to know. To say that without going through the fire, that you'll ever truly understand? Probably not, it is one of those experiences that only the people who were here will truly... and even us. Most of us were in shock during most of it anyway. Do we truly understand what was going on? Probably not.

Diana: Would you say that one part of the county got hit worse than another part? Or did the fire, as it went through, devastate everything that it hit?

Adam: Again, the intensity and speed and scale of this fire. It wasn't selective. I mean, when it pushed through, anything that could burn, did burn. Even some things that we didn't think would burn, steel sheds. It found the insulation; it found the pile of wood or the hay bale that was sitting inside and caught it on fire. It found whatever it could and burned down even the steel sheds. There were flames inside of steel sheds. Stuff that you don't even anticipate burning, it burned. So to say that one part of the county was hit harder than any other part of the county? The areas where they had fire push through were definitely impacted more. But to say that is any less devastation than any other part of the county... when stuff burns up, it is burned up.

Diana: So you've been all over the county and seen the devastation. What do you miss most from before the fire?

Adam: The hardest part for me was probably people's homes. That's a hard thing. Burning up a fence, cattle, those are things. As you drive by and you realize that this person isn't in their house right now, either because it's damaged or because it isn't there. That's a pretty hard thing to go through and drive down through the county and say, that's never going to be there again. Those people were truly impacted. Thank goodness my house is still standing. As far as the rest of it? You know, I talked to a lot of producers and a lot of ranchers, and they're like, "It is the landmarks. When the windmill burned up, you didn't have it to look over there and say, 'Go to the windmill.'" The large cottonwood trees, that they always referenced. "Hey, that's where this part of the pasture is, go over there." But for the most part, it was people's homes; as I drive around, it is those constant reminders. This is going to take a while to recover from. It is the hardest part for me.

Diana: So what can you do, or have you done, to prepare for another disaster? Whether it is a fire or whatever?

Adam: Through my job, we actually do some prescribed burning and tree removal and stuff like that. There's an awareness that, hey, we don't want as many cedar trees out there and definitely not near our houses! To go through and help people with the fences as they build them, to make something that is a little more fire resistant. To think about where they put fences and how we gain access to pastures. I know we weren't able to save a lot of grass, at least in those first days, but afterward, we still could have saved more if we had had access to places. So just how you lay your farm and ranch out and doing that is definitely something to consider. A disaster like that, you can kind of have an idea of what you're going to do. But planning for major disasters is... if we could do it, then New Orleans probably wouldn't be there anymore. We would have moved it out of the way. So there are only certain things you can do. But for me, it isn't so much on the Agency side of things. In my job every day, I do some with that, and on the fire department side of things, I really have a new "end of the spectrum" on how far things can go and how fast they can happen and what you need to do to keep yourself safe and keep everybody else safe in those situations.

Diana: So do you think the people on the fire department benefited from the training that they've done through the years?

Adam: Definitely, and even the fact of how we fought fires and just being able to... We fight a lot of fires down here, the most that I've ever been on in a fire department. We have a lot of rangeland and a lot of district to cover if you look at it that way. We do a lot of mutual aid to a lot of other places. We're not just focused in on a little piece, we cover some ground, and we go across state lines. So the experience and training that we have prior to this fire is probably what saved a lot of firemen's lives, if not other people's lives and properties. Because we knew our equipment and how to run it. We knew how to keep ourselves safe. We knew just how we worked with each other. If this is happening, this truck is going to be here or this truck is going to be there. Was it perfect? No. Was communications strained and did people get upset over what somebody had done? Definitely. But at the same time, I look at other departments I've been on in the past and had this happen there, I don't think they would have come through it nearly as well. That is just an opinion of course, but no, I think we had some resources and we knew how to use them. Had we had more resources, yes we would have done more, but to say that we were ill prepared? Yes. We didn't have a chance against this fire. But to say that we did our best on it and it is what kept people safe. It kept the damage to a minimum. People knew what we were doing out there.

Diana: So what about the community. Is there any way the community could prepare? Like how our fire and emergency and police work together?

Adam: Yes. Communication is always... of course there is always the... I mean, we were told to evacuate, but they didn't tell us to where. So there are some things that can always be learned on that. To tell you the truth, I didn't believe it, when people actually evacuated, because I've been involved, like I said, with hazardous waste response. When you tell people there is ammonia leaking and to get out of their house, they look at you like, "I'm not leaving." When they sent out the word to evacuate Ashland, this town became a ghost town. There

were still a few people left in town, but only a handful to a dozen people. Ninety percent of this community got out right away. There was imminent danger here. The evacuation notice... should we have sheltered everybody in place? That's the only other option you have. You either get everybody completely out of harm's way, or you shelter them in place. That's for someone in emergency management to decide. Would we have been safer just sending everybody to the high school and calling that our defensible point? The high school has a whole bunch of cedar trees around it and a whole bunch of grass.

The fire was out of the north at that point, so all of that would have been hitting the high school. If we'd had everybody there and lost the high school, I wouldn't have wanted to have to make that call. So yes, there are some things there just in communication that can be improved. Would anybody else have responded any differently in that situation? Probably not. The 911 operators probably had the worst job of going through and when people called in, having to say, "We have no one available to get to you." I wouldn't have wanted to have to do that. Fighting fire was bad enough, but to tell someone on the other end of the line that is saying they need help, and you have to tell them, "There's no one to help right now. We'll try, but we're 20 minutes away and that's only if we can find someone to get out there." I wouldn't have wanted that job. So something this wide scale, you can't prepare for it. It was something that we did what we could with the resources we had, and we hope to gosh we don't have to deal with it again.

Diana: So, do you have any other thoughts about this experience? Anything else you'd like to share?

Adam: No, not really, I think we've pretty well covered it. It was an event. Our lives are going on now, but it will be something that impacts this generation, my generation and the younger generation that had to go through it.

Diana: Have your kids talked about it?

Adam: Oh yes. I went through and loaded my kids up that day after the fire, after I hopped off of the fire truck. We jumped into our big old green suburban and loaded it up with supplies and went out. They were very much in the devastation. They saw the dead animals. They saw the ranchers and people out there with blackened faces, except for where their tears had run down their faces. They were a part of all of that. Again, my family was in town and my wife will tell you, she looked around and said, "There's no way we're saving Ashland." There were flames all the way around it. Those kids, they're resilient, thank goodness, but they were definitely a part of it. They're going to remember it and it will be a part of their life.

Diana: Did they go home during the night? Or did they stay at the firehouse?

Adam: They stayed at the firehouse all that first night. I didn't feel safe letting them go back home. That entire night, we were still just trying to save Ashland from burning up, because we'd seen what happened in Englewood, where it went from house to house. We knew the potential of this fire. No, we knew that if it got into Ashland, one house fire to another house fire, we didn't have resources to stop that.