

Diana: What is your name?

Paul: Paul Harden.

Diana: Where do you live?

Paul: I live in the Lexington area northeast of Ashland.

Diana: What is your occupation?

Paul: I'm a farmer and rancher.

Diana: And how old are you?

Paul: Sixty-four and a half.

Diana: Okay, when did you first become aware of the Starbuck Fire, hereafter referred to simply as, "the fire"

Paul: I can't remember that for sure. I know I started watching it on the radar and saw the smoke and then watched some of its advancement. But I think Linda, my wife, might have told me about it.

Diana: Yes. So where were you, and what was your immediate reaction?

Paul: I was concerned, because the humidity was three percent and the winds were expected to gust from 60 to 65 that afternoon. I knew we had a lot of grass in the area and a lot of it was pretty big because of the rains that previous summer.

Diana: So what were your thoughts and actions when you first learned that the fire would hit your property? Or would likely hit your property.

Paul: Well, I had talked to my younger brother Jim and we both talked about the need to prepare. I told him I had seen the weather forecast and knew that there was a cold front that was supposed to come and hit from the northwest. And by that time I had seen that there was one or two fires to the northwest of us that had started southeast of Minneola. And so we both figured it's a lot better to be prepared and not need it, than the other way around.

Diana: So did anyone call you, or did you get any alerts that told you that there was a fire in the north, or how far that fire in the south was that were you talking about with people out that way?

Paul: No. My wife has a good friend, Karen Reimer, who called her and said that Ashland was to be evacuated. So Linda invited her to come to our house because our house is out in the middle of what then was a nice big green wheat field. I felt like we were as secure as you could be on a day like that. So Linda and Karen were keeping track of the fire by way of Facebook, and, I think, some phone calls.

I was getting some equipment ready to fight fire.

Diana: So what type of equipment, and what were you planning to do?

Paul: I had borrowed, and had been using, my brother Jim's water trailer hooked behind one of my pickups and I had just been hauling water to my cattle with it. But he told me he had a fitting that was back in his house that I would need to put on in case we needed the pump. He has a long hose with a one-inch nozzle and his trailer will hold, I think, eleven hundred gallons of water. So I went down to get that fitting and I also had my hired man, Victor Garza, hook my four-wheel drive tractor up to my offset disk in case we needed that.

Diana: So once you saw the smoke and stuff in the northwest, did you have very much time before the fire got to your area?

Paul: No. I had been monitoring the fire by way of radar, as I'd mentioned, earlier in the afternoon and I mistakenly believed that the front was going to hit around sundown. So I'd gone to my brother Jim's to pick up that fitting. He has a tree row to the northwest of his house, and just as I was leaving to go back to my house, which is two miles away, my wife called and she told me she could not see our neighbor's house anymore, which was one mile away.

And I was like, "Really?" And she said, "Yes, the smoke is really dark there."

Well, the wind was just switching at that time. And as I left my brother's place, I came around his tree row, and it was like the picture that I think was taken down by Englewood by Neil Kay, to see the black cloud that was kind of like the Dirty Thirties and was maybe a mile and a half away at that time. As I drove back toward my house, I drove into that and it just turned blacker than I could imagine it ever could be. My lights... it's just like someone had put mud on my headlights because I could barely see the road in front of me and I had to sit up straight and look over the hood just to be able to see my driveway.

Diana: So once you returned home, the smoke was there. Was the fire there yet? Or was it just the smoke?

Paul: I do not know exactly when the fire hit us because, as I mentioned, my house is in the middle of a wheat field. So my hired man and I were in that smoke finishing hooking up my tractor and disk. And then his wife called, and she was very concerned. They were evacuating Protection at that point; that's where he and his family live, so I sent him on home. He actually ran into the fire on the Protection Road, right at the county line.

But I did not know... Somewhere along that line, Mick Sharp, the manager of Ashland Feeders, called me and told me that the fire had already hit John Moore's place and had gone through it. That was the first I knew that basically, it was upon us. The thick black smoke probably lasted five to seven or eight minutes, where you could just barely see and then it slowly started letting up.

Diana: Then could you see flames?

Paul: I could not see flames from my house because of my tree row and because of the smoke. I did... after my hired man left, I felt like I needed to assess this, so I drove out into my wheat field to the northwest of my house, and that's where I saw the flames were in my neighbor's pasture to the northwest of my house.

I had seen the flames across the hills to the west, probably, I'm going to guess, a half hour earlier. That would have been west of Ashland Feeders, probably another five miles west, just on the horizon.

Diana: So you've grown up in the country, and you've seen lots of wildfires and probably some controlled burns.

Paul: Oh yes.

Diana: Can you see any comparison between those and what this was like?

Paul: They're both fire. That's where the comparison ends. A controlled burn is usually exactly that, and you don't do it when the humidity is three percent and the wind's blowing at 65.

Paul: Thankfully, I never saw the wall of fire that some people endured. When I got into my tractor with my disk to go fight the fire, by that time, the wall was basically past us. So I had more of the side fires most of the time, that I and my brothers were trying to fight.

Diana: So where did you go?

Paul: The first place I went was straight south of my house, and then I turned west along the Protection Road toward the community building.

My brother Jim had called me, and he and our brother Phil had gone that direction to see where the fire was, and they came up on it as it was coming across. It was already south of John Moore's house, and in the grass to the south of John's house. It had gone through John's place. So my brother called me and said, "How soon can you get here because it's about to hit the Protection Road," which is a paved road. And I said I was on my way coming as fast as I could get there.

Diana: So you were all on tractors?

Paul: No. I was at that point. Jim and Phil were in a pickup to assess where the fire was. They had no idea that it was that close either. So they ran into it there near the anhydrous plant in along Bluff Creek.

Diana: So did you go back and get the water tank?

Paul: Phil and Jim did at some point there, I think fairly quickly after that. But by the time I got there with the tractor, the fire had already jumped the road and was down into Bluff Creek, but it was coming down the road ditch. And so I used my disk and started fighting fire in the road ditch, because I had some haystacks to the east and, you know, obviously wanted to try to protect those and just stop the fire anywhere I could.

The one mistake I made, well, I made several, but the first that hit me was that in our hurry to get the tractor hooked up to the disk and get going, I did not check the hydraulic oil. Being on the slopes of the road, I was low on hydraulic oil, and suddenly I could no longer steer my tractor. Thankfully, I was in the road ditch and off the paved road, but at the same time, there was fire coming towards me and that concerned me too.

Diana: So did the fire go on the north side of the road where the schoolhouse was?

Paul: Yes, we got it. It never made it to the old schoolhouse, the old Lexington Schoolhouse.

Later on, my brother Jim took my tractor and disk and made some passes in case it came down that draw that would protect the community building. But there were some weeds further up the draw; it did not burn through those weeds. So that stopped it there.

Diana: So this was the afternoon and evening?

Paul: Yes, it hit... I was going to go look at my phone logs to see when Linda called me, but I didn't. It hit somewhere between 5:15 and 5:30 that afternoon.

So we were then fighting fire wherever we felt like we needed to. Jim used my tractor and disk on the road ditch some to stop it in case it came from the north and to keep it from going further south across places.

Diana: So, did you spend all evening and night fighting fire?

Paul: Yes.

Diana: How far east did you go?

Paul: We never made it very far east. We went south several times.

Diana: How far south?

Paul: We made it up into our hills three different times because the fire would restart up there from one spot

or another. That's where we probably got two and a half miles south of the Protection Road up in the hills on the grass there. The furthest east that we made it until the next afternoon was there at my brother Jim's corner which would be 29 Road.

Diana: So did you lose electricity at your house?

Paul: I have a generator that kicks on automatically. My wife said she did not remember. What happens is that the electricity will go off for about five or six seconds, and then the generator kicks on and it'll come back on. And Linda did not remember that happening, but it was a rather exciting evening.

Diana: So did you have to move cattle?

Paul: No, I am so thankful, and I know my brother Mike is also. We got that ice storm in January and that renewed our wheat. So my cattle were still out on wheat pasture and so were Mike's. I was getting ready to ready to move mine off the next week, which I ended up doing. But that was the blessing. So I did not have to worry about going and getting them off of some grass because they were all on wheat, if they so chose. There were a couple of places that they could also go into a pasture or the wheat field. They were safe, so I'm assuming they were in the wheat field during the fire.

Diana: You mentioned that you did some firefighting on Tuesday. Where was the fire on Tuesday?

Paul: Well, I might just back up and tell you. On Monday night, there were several places that we tried to fight fire. I was bringing my tractor south of Bluff Creek and the arm ripped out of the rock shaft on my disk. Basically, I was done. It had dropped it down on the ground. So at 7 o'clock the next morning, I called my hired man and told him I really needed him to come weld that back. By noon he had it fixed, and so I got to start using it again Tuesday afternoon.

When we lost that, Jim at some point had got his tractor and disk hooked up and used it until he tore the gang off a bit. He ripped some axles off, and then he got another disk and basically did... some of the tires were flat, so he ended up ruining it. So we went through three offset disks that night.

Diana: So was it going through places that you couldn't really see and running over stuff?

Paul: By that time, the smoke had let up enough that there were places that the wind either could not get to real well or the grass was thinner... sagebrush. My brother Jim discovered a place that the fire had... as he was coming down Bluff Creek, he discovered a place he could fit between some trees with his disk folded up.

And so Phil and Jim and I made our stand there and started disking that. Phil's stepson, Konnor Maule, I think, took me back to my tractor that had a loader on it, an 8300 John Deere.

So I started pushing trees over that were on fire and we made a fire guard then on Bluff Creek, using Jim's water trailer, my tractor and loader, and Jim's tractor and disk. That saved both Jim's and Mike's alfalfa stacks, a lot of equipment that they both had down in that area, a lot of grass, and a lot of fence.

Diana: Was Jim's house ever in danger?

Paul: No, because we got that done. Had it gone on down Bluff Creek and then started back burning... for a little while the next day, the wind went back to the southwest, and at that point, had it been down on the creek. That could have endangered his house.

Diana: So how much trouble was the wind on Monday? Did it stay coming out of one direction, or did it switch a lot?

Paul: It did not switch a lot on Monday. It was either out of the southwest, or boom, it switched very

quickly to the northwest. It swung to the west and to the northwest very quickly. Then it stayed out of the northwest all that night.

Diana: Did it get cold?

Paul: Yes it did. I had on a jacket, but I was in and out. Of course, when you're occupied, you don't think about that stuff near as much. At one point there, Jim ended up picking up Dale Coverdale. Dale was attempting to get to Bucklin, and he ran into the fire and ended up down the road ditch. He almost got stuck there and came back, and so he ended up helping us part of the night. Dale did not have a coat, and some point I made it back to the house and got him a coat. But he had gotten wet out helping Jim refill the water trailer at one of those points in time and it was cold and it was windy. So with all of that, he definitely was cold. So for a time, I put him in my tractor with the heater on and got him warmed back up.

Diana: So, what did it look like when the sun came up Tuesday? Could you see? Were you pretty tired?

Paul: I still had too much adrenaline going and was still fighting fire. I guess there's always a few things that you remember vividly. I took very few pictures that night because I was just too busy fighting fire here or calling a brother and saying, "Okay, what about this?" and, "How are you doing that?" and whatnot. But at one point, when we had gone up into the hills to try to stop the fire there, I think I'd paused for a moment to, I don't know, wait on my brother or something. I looked around and I noticed that it did not matter what direction that I looked, I could either see fire or I could see fire reflecting off of smoke. It was 360 degrees around. It was one of those deals that you never think that you'll ever see. But we did.

Diana: Was the fire high? Was it still jumping blazes pretty high or was it mostly on the ground and the wind was blowing it?

Paul: It depended upon where it got to. By that time, the fast stuff came across where there was no fields, you know, and pretty good sized grass. Some of the grass my brother Mike and I both were saving some to graze our cows on as we came off of the wheat, both of us had had that grass burn. So we did not have that anymore. I was not there when most of that burned. But I'm assuming that it burned real fast there.

Diana: Was it pretty tall?

Paul: Some of that was pretty tall, but where we were at most of the time, it was not real big and I could get my disk out on it. Yes, it was hot, and the tractor and all that.

Diana: Is this native grass that's never been broke out before?

Paul: Yes. Most all of that. Yes.

Diana: So it would be really tough to get your disk through it?

Paul: Well, yeah, but you just do what you've got to do. And if there's rocks, there's rocks. Up there, there are canyons. So we had to... I tried to go up a canyon wall putting out fire, and my tractor dug down and I couldn't make it up. So I went back to a place I could climb, or could get up, and turned around and started disking back in the fire and then I went off of that place that I couldn't go up. Thankfully, it wasn't as fast as a roller coaster, but it was every bit as steep.

Diana: Some interesting things that you got yourself into that evening.

Paul: Yes. Thankfully, nothing that I ever... I've had people ask me if I was ever afraid, and no, I wasn't. I don't know if it's because I'm foolish, or because I was busy. But I never really felt in harm's way, even when I did lose a tractor later on that night, even when it was on fire, when it got so hot in the cab I knew, "I'm done. I've got to get out, and I can't do anything about it."

Diana: So were you all in constant contact and were you in kind of the same vicinity?

Paul: Phil and Jim and I, the majority of the time, knew where one another was or was going to be. When Jim and I were working hard to make a wide barrier on Bluff Creek, it had also gone into a tree row on me and was burning down through that tree row slowly. The wind slowed it down, so it was not burning fast, but that took us a long time to put that out. We had to use my tractor and loader to pile some trees up that were dead and leaned over and move them out of the way. Then we had to use his water trailer.

Meanwhile, Phil took Jim's tractor and disk up into the hills and made a barrier right along the edge of the fire for quite a ways. By the time he came back, that disk was also...

Diana: How long did it take you to do all those, set up all those barriers and disk all that stuff?

Paul: Oh, on the creek we probably worked right there at that spot for 45 minutes. Well, it would have been longer because I had to go get my tractor loader to push trees over and pile them up. So that was probably close to an hour and a half, and then we went to the tree row and worked on putting that out. That's when I put Dale Coverdale in my tractor to warm up because he was standing there shivering and I happened to notice. I was like, "Hey, let's warm you up."

Meanwhile, Phil had gone up to the hills and had made some barriers up there, which in a couple of places it jumped. So we ended up back up there two different times. In fact, after we got the barrier on Bluff Creek and we felt very secure on that, I had taken my tractor back to the house and hooked it up to what's called a box scraper. I took it down some road ditches and further north on Road 29. I made a barrier there in the road ditch, and the fire burned right to that barrier and then a couple of other places too. Then we went up in the hills again, and I took my tractor and box scraper up there and I was using it. When you use it, you basically have to drive over the top of the fire. So the second mistake I made, was not realizing I needed to wash off the back of my tractor really well, so there was no oily dirt on the back, because that's where the fire started.

Diana: And that's the tractor you lost?

Paul: Yes, I had a towel in there, and I tried to get out and beat it out and could not do so. Phil and Jim were on the other side of the canyon with the water trailer putting fire out over there. I tried calling Phil, well, the phone signal is not very good up there, and it went to his voicemail (or he was on the phone, one of the two).

So I headed that direction with the tractor until it got warmer than I liked in the cab. So I bailed out and started walking towards them. They got the fire out on their side of the canyon and looked over and saw me. So here they came. So they saved the loader, but the back of the tractor burned up inside the cab.

Diana: So was your house ever in any danger since it was surrounded by wheat?

Paul: I had a little concern that night because before I left, I could look straight overhead and there were embers going over the top. Well, with three percent humidity, how big of an ember do you need to get to a tree row with grass up there... And you know, brown grass around the house... So as a precaution, I set up a sprinkler near the tree row that's right close to my house to soak down the grass there, so that if it landed there it would not start that grass, which then would start the trees, which then were directly in line with the wind blowing right to my house.

Diana: So did you have a lot of smoke damage in your house?

Paul: No. We weren't close enough, and we had the windows shut and all of that.

Diana: Did you lose any buildings?

Paul: No, I did not.

Diana: Just the tractor?

Diana: I just lost that tractor and of course a lot of grass and a lot of fence. I managed to even save all my bales. So, the funny thing is, after something like that when you hear how bad it was for your neighbors, you feel some guilt. But that's false guilt because I didn't do anything, that was just the way that it happened. I was never so glad to be a farmer, as I was that night because I had a wheat field around my house and very, very thankful that I felt like I could leave my house and go try to put out fires somewhere and not worry about it.

Diana: So how many days did you fight fire?

Paul: Well, we started roughly at 5:30 that Monday afternoon. My son-in-law, Jeff Whiteman, and a friend of his came from Marion on Tuesday afternoon, and they got to help put out fire. And I think by sundown Tuesday, we finally had everything out, anything that we felt was a risk to cause more damage.

Diana: Were there a lot of fires burning in the canyons that you had trouble getting to?

Paul: No, because it had just burned through there where we made this stand up in the hills. Most of those areas we could get equipment down into. The places we couldn't, we used Jim's water trailer with a hose. The one humorous case, when the hose would not reach, I was riding with Jim after my tractor broke down. Phil was up there with the tractor and disk in the hills and we were there too, using his water trailer and we couldn't quite reach it.

Jim did not have... he had no shovel, no paper sack, no gunny sacks, no anything to fight fire with. And so we ended up down in the bottom of this canyon that Phil couldn't quite get to but we needed him to come in and disk across this tall grass that was on fire because it was too hot for us. Well, he swung around through there twice, but he turned with a disk. When you turn, it rides out of the ground and doesn't do any good. Then he took off. We tried to call him, but of course there's no signal when you're up there in a canyon. Then he saw it was on fire, so he came back again and once again he turned and still didn't get it out.

So I took my coat off and started swinging my coat and used it to fight fire because I couldn't... That's just too hot to stamp with your feet trying to put it out. So... the third time was a charm. He came, and we got him to go straight across it and basically put it out. So when I got to the top, back up to the pickup and water trailer, while I was holding my coat. By that time I was hot, having been swinging it and all, and didn't need it. When I unfolded it, I realized my coat was on fire and was smoldering! So I've got about a three-inch hole in that coat to remind me of the fire.

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

One of them is looking to the west, on what we still call the old R.A. Dorsey Pasture. At that point, I have no idea why it did not just rush across that pasture earlier in the day. Evidently, the wheat fields to the north-west had slowed it down.

That entire ridge was all on fire at the same time, and you could just see clear down on the Aldridge place. I was probably looking at a mile and a half long fire, just all at one time.

I think the thing that really bothered me the most, was when I stopped for a moment that night to think about it, I was certain that I was going to lose neighbors and friends.

I just knew that, and I'm so thankful that it did not happen. There was a lot of miracles, and I know you've heard a lot of those stories by now, how miraculous it was that people did not die, that people were not seriously injured.

Diana: When you were out there fighting the fire, did you have trouble breathing?

Paul: Only the only the times when I was on foot. When I was in my tractor, if the smoke got bad, I would just shut the fan off so that I did not bring smoke into my cab. And then you know, when you change direction or whatever, then you could turn it back on and then bring the fresh air back.

Diana: So were you in contact with anybody else, or other places in the county? Were you in contact with Mike?

Paul: Not until I saw Mike. Mike ended up with the road grader out in our area, after he had worked around Ashland and over around Sitka and wherever all else he had worked. He had tore up his tractor west of Ashland, so he had went and got the road grader and used it. And I saw a road grader then, just before dawn in our area, as I was coming in with my tractor with the box scraper. So I called Mike because I thought that looked like our road grader. He said yes, that it was him. He was making a fire guard, which also helped in saving a big area.

If you look on the map, there is kind of a wedge shape that at the very north end of it is the field at the north end of my house. From there it starts getting wider and it goes towards them, and that's where Jim, Phil and I, and Dale and Konnor managed to stop the fire on Bluff Creek and then other places coming in. So that saved a lot of fence and grass on us and on Steve Stephens and on some of the other neighbors down that direction.

Diana: So what effect do you think this fire will have on the community? More physical or more financial?

Paul: I think emotional. It's brought people closer together, that's that's stepping back and looking at the big picture because there are obviously some people that financially it was very devastating for them. And I'm very thankful for so many people across this country that sent hay and fencing materials and so on and so forth.

And I know there are... I understood there are a few people that did not have insurance on their homes. But as a whole, I think probably emotionally, if we can step back and understand what we had happen and the miracles that occurred that so many of us lived through it.

And then I say "us" meaning us, my neighbors and friends. It's our choice what we do with that. If we go back to just worrying about us or if we help each other. The way our economy works out here, at home, it works a whole lot better to help each other. Emotionally and physically it works a lot better to help each other.

Diana: So did you have any of the volunteers help you.

Paul: Yes, my brother Phil used a lot of volunteers on fence. I lease a lot of Phil's grass. I had two neighbors that were unable to do something at the time about places that I needed some fence put back in rather soon. So some of these volunteers, you know I started to say helped me, but I think they did most of it. I just showed them, "Here's what we need, here's where we need a gate in a box corner and..." I mostly managed those people.

Diana: Did you go in and participate in any of the meals that they had at the camp?

Paul: And I was able to do that one time. Yes.

Diana: You met some of the people. Did you get any of the hay?

Paul: Yes. Pretty much. I mean people had to work real hard to refuse hay. Because I started off... There was people that needed hay a whole lot worse than me. You know, I still had some grass that had not burned yet. Down the road, I was probably going to need some. I was going to have to use some of my hay. Randall Spare, at one point, told me, "These people want to help, and you need to accept their help to let them

experience the feeling of how good it is to help somebody."

That was probably one of the hardest things for me because I'm just like most people out here. I'm one of the guys that goes and helps somebody that needs help. I've not been in this situation needing to receive help. I've always heard people talk about how humbling it was. I never understood that until this. I certainly understand it now.

Diana: There was no way to turn down help, right? There was so much that was needed.

Paul: It depends. I know a couple of guys that put their fence back themselves, without any help. Now they did not have 50 miles or 100 miles. I figured up I had 15 and a half miles. Well, ten of that was landlords. So I just had about five miles of my own and most of that, I'd put new wire on in the last few years and so most of that just needed repair.

Diana: So did you take advantage of the foundation application and the FSA for fencing and wiring and stuff?

Paul: Yes, I did.

Diana: Tractor loss?

Paul: I had some insurance and discovered, as most people did, that it wasn't enough insurance because trying to replace that tractor with another one very similar cost a lot more than I anticipated.

Diana: So, who are some of the people or agencies that proved most helpful either during the fire or afterward? Did you see any of the task force firemen up that way?

Paul: Yes. On Wednesday, there were some of the guys from Colorado that were up that way. There were still some trees on fire. It had burned all the way around them, so it wasn't going to go anywhere, but I think my brother Phil took them back in and put some of those out. It's funny you asked that, Jim and I discussed it later, neither one of us there called the fire department that night. I mean, because the fire started in the southwest part of the county, you knew they were snowed under trying to save homes. So we didn't... I mean, not that our homes never were at great risk, but there was just like... You do triage. You save people's homes before you worry about grass or fence or something as trivial as that is. But I had mentioned Mike had come up with the road grader after I'd burned my tractor and lost it. Then someone took me over to the road grader and I got it. So we used it over on Steve Stephens.

I was heading east with it and we ran into our first fire trucks. I think that was probably somewhere around noon on Tuesday. So when we met them, they were coming from the east and putting that out, so we turned and went back and we could see it really had restarted back on us, on my brother Mike's grass to the west. So we headed over there, and as I headed over there, the U-joint went out on the road grader and so we had to park it.

Diana: So how was that fire rekindling? Were there clumps of grass or trees basically, or embers blowing?

Paul: The one time I know what it was because I was very concerned about it, it was up in the pasture, and there were dried cow pies that were smoldering. Well, then as the wind came up out of the southwest and as it got drier there that early afternoon, it rekindled there. By that time, my hired man had my disk fixed and so I had Konnor take me back down to my tractor and disk. I just folded it up and then got up there. That was the third time that we were there, so that time I was able to disk it under really good. Then Jim came along with the sprayer and anything that was smoking at all, you know, that was close to the grass that was unburned, he would soak it down. That's when we finally got all of that out, up in the hills.

Diana: So did you see any dead wildlife or cattle or did you have to worry about any of that type of stuff?

Paul: I thought about that later. I saw absolutely none. I think the reason is that we had enough wheat fields in our area. That and we were saved down on Bluff Creek. There's lots of wildlife down in there, and I think it did not chase them out of there. And so they had wheat fields to go to and obviously... I know back to the northwest, where there are no wheat fields, that's where Giles lost a lot of cattle, and there were a lot of deer and so on. But I never saw any rabbits, coyotes, or anything that was killed by the fire.

Diana: So when did you go back to doing your normal chores?

Paul: Well, those are there every day. So I had to.

Diana: You're feedings cows while you were fighting fire?

Paul: Well, they were still on wheat. I think I mentioned that my son-in-law from Marion came on Tuesday afternoon with a friend of his. So looking back, you realize you are in a state of shock no matter what. I couldn't think very clearly then, and he was like, "Well, what about the electric fence?" And I'm, "Oh yeah!" So he went places where it had burned the fence completely down. They put up some electric fence for me on that Tuesday afternoon. Some of that, they did until dark.

Diana: What about water wells?

Paul: Well, I was just going to say we had to check water. I had fire burn completely around a solar well. It partially charred the wiring and it still works fine. I haven't touched it yet. There's no bare wire showing, and it did not seem to hurt the solar panels, and the plastic casing is okay. In another location, I didn't have water in a plastic tank, and it burned a hole in the plastic tank.

Diana: Just a hole, it didn't melt it all the way?

Paul: No, it did not melt it all the way. I just think that heat was intense enough that it just started melting it. But it obviously never caught on fire.

Diana: So were there neighbors or other people that came out to make sure you guys were out okay on Tuesday and Wednesday?

Paul: You would run into neighbors at one time or another. I ran into John Moore with my tractor and disk after I got that road ditch put out. I went on down to it with my tractor, and that's when he told me his story. The fire was going through his place, and he and Lisa were trying to hook up the disk to his tractor. John was covered in soot. I was just so thankful that he and Lisa were fine. Then my brother Jim has...oh, I forget what you call it, the Bluetooth phone that's on his ear so he can talk and not have to hold his phone.

That night, when I think he was going to fill up the water trailer again, he was on the phone with me when someone pulled up beside him and started talking to him. It was like I could hear this person. I could not figure out who that was. And this person was telling me what they had been through and I'm just like, "Oh my goodness."

Well, it turned out it was Brandon Grigsby and his voice... He had been in the smoke and so badly damaged his vocal chords that for the moment it did not sound like Brandon at all. So Jim told me afterward. So at times, if you were on the road, you'd run into someone.

Diana: Did you have to worry about downed power lines?

Paul: I never saw any where we were. And I think part of that has to do with the wheat fields and not having the grass because that's where you saw a lot of power lines and poles that had been burned. With the grass, the intense heat caught those poles on fire. But I did not see any that night that were on fire. No, I did not.

I'm guessing that's why; I don't know that.

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

Paul: Sure, the community as a whole is closer. You help each other where you can; you know when you hear a story of two brothers making up as the result of the fire that warms your heart when you hear it. When you see people or hear people giving hugs that never gave hugs to anybody in their life.

Sometimes you've got to look pretty hard for some of the good. There is good there that happened.

Diana: So what can you do, or have you done, to prepare for another fire or big disaster like this.

Paul: Well, I keep thinking. Kim Canton told me that Nathan Matson was keeping her abreast of things and told her exactly when the wind was going to change and all that. I keep thinking that whatever phone app he has that's weather wise, I need that! Just to know. I mean, I knew that the wind was going to switch, but I didn't know what time and that was a miscalculation on my part because I was not ready as soon as I should have been.

I assumed wrongly, this was that another mistake that I made, that after the wind switched we could have fire in our area 30 minutes later. We had fire in our area less than five minutes after the wind switched, which completely stunned me.

Diana: When you were out there driving a tractor and all that stuff, did you have any trouble with the wind blowing you around? Had it died down some?

I was using my four-wheel drive. It's big enough and heavy enough that... If I hadn't been up in the hills when that first was coming through, coming at you in the smoke. I've been in that situation back in 1979 on Giles. You can get disoriented, but more so, you can't see. If there's a canyon there, you can drive off in a canyon. So you have to be very careful.

I learned that in 1979 because I almost did that. And it's given me a lot of respect for firemen that go into a pasture in the dark fighting fire. They have no clue what that pasture looks like or where their trails are.

Diana: So what types of things can the community do to prepare for a fire or any disaster? We feel we were pretty well prepared as well as we could be?

Paul: I think as well as we knew. If you start naming names, where do you stop? With Millie Fudge and the financial side and setting up what she had set up and the firemen. I mean those guys from Colorado that are professional firefighters just were amazed at our guys and how well we could fight prairie fire.

Well, we've got better at it because we figured out what works better and how to do it. And so that's... we were fairly well prepared there...

I'm guessing for a lot of years, if we ever have a situation like that again and the fire starts somewhere, you're going to see a lot of houses that are disked around long before a fire might be there, just as a precaution. There's nothing wrong with that. I think Brandon Grigsby told me that soon after that the CRP that's 100 feet from his house is going to be a wheat field. He will not have grass quite that close, that big tall grass.

Diana: So do you have any other thoughts about this experience that you want to share? Anything else that comes to mind?

Paul: I do... you know the millennials get maligned a whole lot on the news. We saw a lot of young kids come from lots of states and most of them knew how to work and jumped in and were willing to do so. And so I think we just hear about the bad ones. That's what news does. We all found out there's a whole lot of good people all across this country and then a number of them showed up and if they couldn't show up, they

sent money or bales or whatever it was. There may be a lot of us paying it forward for a long time because it's ended up being the time that we needed help.

And then this is obvious, but the firemen and their families, all the folks that afterward with the hay coming in and the materials and the workers and all those folks that worked so hard doing that. Taking care of those people and trying to make it a good experience for those that had come and those that had donated hay trying to get them loaded. A lot of us around the country are just trying to keep our heads above water. But we all greatly appreciate that, where the community stepped up and helped those in agriculture a whole lot and a whole lot of us appreciate it a lot.

I just thank God that I can keep doing that.

I've had a lot of people that have not been able to talk about their experience. Now I don't really remember, but three people have started to tell me their story. They preface it by saying, "Well, I'm not a religious person but..." Then they go on to tell me their story of the miracle that happened to them that they're still alive. That evidently happened over and over. So in spite of it's being as tough as this was, of everybody who was living in this county, there were no major injuries and no deaths. That in itself was a miracle. I'm very thankful to God for that.