

Catastrophic Wildfire: Operation Blessing Arrives in Texas Panhandle

A catastrophic wildfire burning through the Texas Panhandle has quickly become the largest wildfire in the state's history continuing to threaten homes, cattle and livelihoods.

The Smokehouse Creek Fire, which broke out earlier this week, has extended to nearly 1.1 million acres scorching rural ranchlands and destroying homes, firefighters said Feb. 29.

"This is now both the largest and most destructive fire in Texas history," the West Odessa Volunteer Fire Department wrote on Facebook. "It is also the second largest wildfire in U.S. history."

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The fire has merged with another blaze and is only 3% contained, signs that the blaze is far from over.

It's not clear what started the fire which has burned since Feb. 26, and has grown with quickly.

The full extent of the damage remains unknown as well, but land about the size of Delaware is scorched as homes and herds have been destroyed.

Our Operation Blessing team arrived on the scene Thursday. We are establishing our base of operations, connecting with local churches and government agencies, and beginning to hand out meals in #://

– Operation Blessing (@operationbless) March 1, 2024

The owners of the Turkey Track Ranch, a historic Texas ranch, estimate that 80% of their pastures, plains and creek bottom vegetation have been burned by fire, KHOU-TV reported.

“The loss of livestock, crops and wildlife, as well as ranch fencing and other infrastructure throughout our property as well as other ranches and homes across the region is, we believe, unparalleled in our history,” the owners said of their 80,000 acres.

Meanwhile, at least two people have died from the fires.

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Truck driver Cindy Owen died while evacuating on the road and 83-year-old Joyce Blankenship also lost her life, the family said.

“The house was gone,” said her grandson Nathan Blankenship. “There was no way she could’ve gotten out.”

It was a close call for Jerry Harrah of Fritch.

“Where the fire was, I figured I was alright,” he told CBS News. “Until I turned around, and it was right across the street from me. And I got burned trying to get out of there.”{eoa}

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