To Burn or Not to Burn, that is the question.

Remember, if you depend on everyone else to take care of you, you're leaving the most important person out. Don't wait to make a plan. Know yourself, know your situation, and be prepared to save your own life.

Fire & Humidity
Higher humidity lowers fire risk because moist air prevents fuel's from drying out and makes ignition harder.
Fuels absorb moisture from the air. Dry grasses, leaves, and crop residue naturally take in moisture when humidity is high. More moisture in the fuel means: It takes more heat to ignite, flames spread more slowly, and embers are less likely to start spot fires.
Fire danger models all treat low relative humidity as a **major fire risk multiplier** because it directly dries fuels and increases ignition probability.

To Burn or Not to Burn, that is the question.
Or it seems like it is the question most asked when it comes to Emergency Management. Just ask dispatch how many times they must explain that Phillips County is once again under a burn ban. It seems like the restrictions on burning last half the summer and fall. The frustration is palpable and understandable. Fire can be useful for rangeland management, trash removal, etc. But Kansas weather causes difficulties, drought, wind gusts, and high temperatures make even small fires dangerous.

The decision to restrict burning is not made lightly, it is given every consideration, but ultimately the safety of our Phillips County Residents will always be the priority. The Kansas Wildfire of 2017 is reminder that danger is never that far from home. Please read below regarding the largest fire in Kansas history.

Kansas's Largest Wildfire, 2017
On 06 March 2017, Oklahoma, Texas, and Kansas were experiencing critical fire conditions. Extremely low humidity (10%), unseasonably warm temperatures, and 50 mph winds gusting to 70 mph. For weeks, the National Service had been sending wildfire alerts stating fire conditions were extreme. There had been almost no precipitation for six months; before that, however, a lot of rain had fallen, and now the plentiful prairie grasses stood up tall and tinder dry.

Early in the afternoon a small fire began near the town of "Slapout" Oklahoma. Slapout, at the intersection of a county road and a much-used east-west state highway, has a population of five. The town's name used to be Nye, but in the nineteen-fifties its residents, who were then more numerous, changed it. Locals explain that there was a store in Nye where, if you asked the owner for a particular item, he often went to look for it and came back and said, "We're slap out of it!" How this inspired a name change no one knows.

Just to the south on the county road stands the Slapout firehouse, a metal building with three bay doors and six enormous fire trucks behind them. These vehicles, acquired from the military and the forest service, have been modified for prairie firefighting by the firemen themselves, all of whom are volunteers. Charlie Starbuck is the fire chief. That afternoon Starbuck received a page about a grass fire due to a downed power line. When he arrived at the scene, with three trucks and eight crew, he discovered the fire was large and growing rapidly. He called neighboring fire departments immediately.

Ashland, Kansas, is almost fifty miles from Slapout, if you follow a straight line across the prairie. As the county seat of Clark County, Ashland has a population of about eight hundred and fifty. At the time, Millie Fudge was Clark County's head of emergency management operations. She worked with the volunteer fire departments and the police, not only in Ashland but also in the county's two other towns, both of which are smaller.

On the morning of the fires, Millie was checking the Weather Service updates. At about eleven-thirty, she got a notification about the Starbuck Fire and a request for Clark County to send whoever was available down to Oklahoma as reinforcements. She set out in the department's pickup, but before she'd gone twenty-five miles it became obvious that they would have their own problems closer to home.

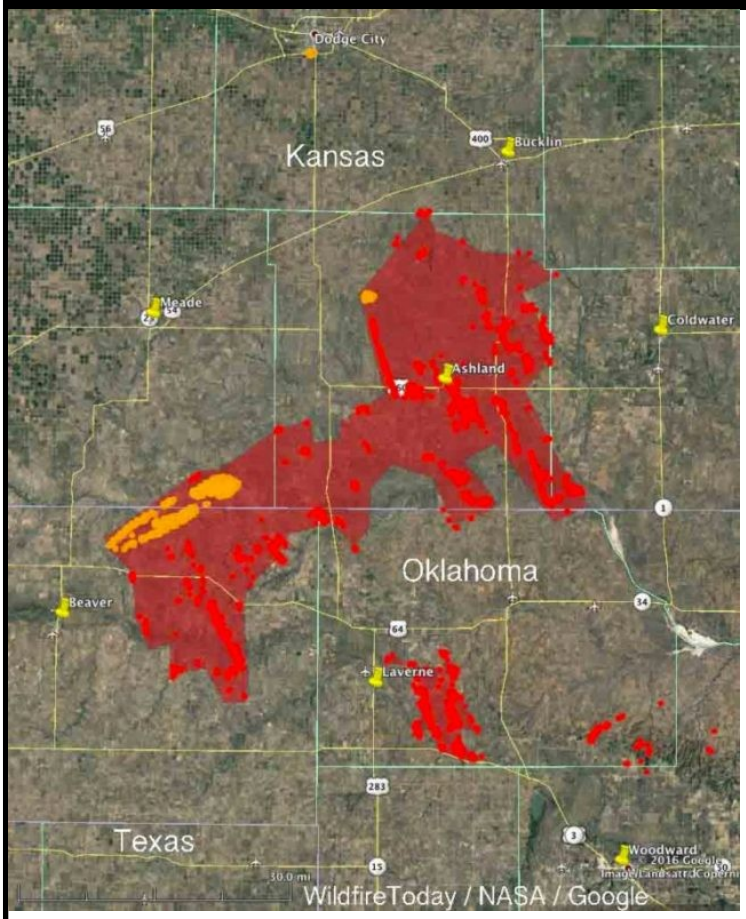
She stopped near Englewood, two miles from the state line, the county's southern border. By that time, the fire was approaching a ranch owned by a man named Frosty Ediger. Ediger had raised cattle and wheat in Clark County for fifty years and was now on his tractor trying to plow a firebreak around his house. A fireman watching both Frosty and the oncoming inferno, thought, "that old man is going to die."
The southwest sky was gray with black smoke boiling upwards. The horizon line was black, embers flew, and the fierce heat added its own force to the wind which sounded like a roar. At this time the Englewood volunteer firemen had already given up trying to stop the ranks of flames rolling across the prairie and were focused on saving people and structures

Miraculously, a jump of the wind caused the fire to jump over Frosty Ediger's house and buildings. Englewood firemen shifted their efforts to saving the town. Millie saw the arm of flames sweeping north and realized that she and her team would have to manage the disaster from Ashland. They drove back on Highway 283, watching telephone poles burn as they went. The Englewood firemen had advised her to go, but as they watched the flashing lights recede, they felt completely alone.

Millie Fudge did, too. She had called the sheriff's office in Ashland and asked them to call Mutual Aid, an organization of neighboring counties that help one another in emergencies. But fires were more widespread at this time due to more downed power lines. When the sheriff's office called her back, they said that all trucks had gone to other fires and none were available. Millie then asked them to call counties farther out, but the same answer came back. Eleven separate fires burned in Kansas that day, though none the size of what was approaching Ashland. Just then it hit Millie. **Clark County's three volunteer fire departments (in Englewood, Ashland, and Minneola) would be defending their towns and county entirely on their own. For Millie, this was the most frightening moment.**

On folding tables in Ashland's ambulance garage, Millie Fudge set up the Emergency Operations Center for Clark County. At three-eleven in the afternoon, Millie ordered the evacuation of the nursing home and the Ashland Health Center. She also ordered the evacuation of the entire town of Englewood and, about twenty minutes later, the evacuation of Ashland itself. Residents grabbed what they could and drove southeast, to Buffalo, Oklahoma, or east, to Protection, Kansas.

Still the fire came on. Tumbleweeds caught fire and flew forty feet in the air, cedar trees ignited and burst into flames, and the wind swept through the dry grass at a terrifying speed. Ashland's firefighters had never seen a blaze that could not be outflanked and subdued. "But what could you do against this monster?" Like the Englewood Fire Department, Ashland tried to save the town (structures and people). Houses were hosed, flame-retardant foam was used, but some houses could not be saved.



Damage: An estimated $44,650,000 in damage occurred in Clark County, according to the county's emergency management department. Of the estimation, $41 million was in fencing, $1.28 million from 21 occupied homes that were destroyed and another $1.3 million for damage to electrical poles and wires.

For reasons no one can explain, some cattle ran straight into the flames,. Other ranches began to plow firebreaks. Mike Harden, a farmer and rancher, got his tractor and heavy-duty disk plow and began to plow all around Ashland. He disked along the state and county roads on both shoulders, and along
fences, and all around the health center, on the town's west side, and around the southwest side of the high school, and around the house of his former math teacher.

At about four in the afternoon, the wind shifted from out of the west or southwest to out of the north. David Redger, the Ashland fire chief, conferred with Millie, decided that Ashland was most vulnerable from the northwest, and sent trucks there. At Garth Gardiner's, the firemen told Gardiner they would try to save his house, and they did. It touched him to know that some of these men, neighbors of his, helped him when at the same

The fire department now had more fires than trucks. The last evacuees made it out on roads with fire so close on either side that it blistered the paint on their cars. By 6:48 P.M., fire surrounded Ashland on all sides, and it was impossible to enter or leave the town. Those evacuated to Buffalo and Protection had to be evacuated farther, to the towns of Woodward, Oklahoma, and Coldwater, Kansas.

On the front line in Oklahoma, Charlie Starbuck and his crew fought on. When the wind changed to out of the north, flames suddenly surrounded them on three sides. Starbuck always drives with both windows of the truck cab open so he will feel the same heat as those riding on the back. Now the encroaching flames leaped through the cab, in one window and out the other. Starbuck ducked. By misting around themselves and blasting the fire with their hoses, they reached safer ground upwind.

As night fell in Ashland, the few people remaining in town looked out at flames in every direction. Not all were sure they would ever see their families again.

People give different explanations for what saved the town. Some point to the firebreaks that Mike Harden disked and graded. In places, you could see where the fire had come up to one of those and stopped. A wheat field on the edge of town proved crucial. An aerial photograph from a day or two later shows the soot black of the incinerated prairie meeting the spring green of the four-hundred-acre field in a straight, uncompromised line. The fire continued to threaten the town far into the next day. Ashland's firefighters worked continuously for more than forty hours straight.

Phillips County EM
205 F. Street, Suite 110,
Phillipsburg KS 67661
785-540-4262
pcem@phillipscountyem.com

What procedures should I consider prior to burning?

1. Check local regulations to ensure burning is not restricted (Phillips County monitors burning conditions daily). 2. Monitor weather conditions. 3. Clear the area. Select a location at least 150 feet away from structures, utility lines, and any other flammable materials. 4. Prepare your equipment. Have a water source (garden hose or pump can), shovel and rake ready before you ignite. 5. Create a 5-foot wet control line around the area. 6. Notify your neighbor so they are aware you will be burning and for how long.

COUNTY of PHILLIPS — KANSAS —

What I have seen with my own eyes makes me afraid not to do what I can to protect against the calamities.

The devastation was immense. Buildings, fences, and equipment were all lost, but the worst impact was the loss and suffering of the cattle. Thousands of cattle died in the fire, but others survived, blinded, no ears, hair burnt off, and feet burned so badly their hooves fell off. They moaned and swayed, and it cut into the rancher's souls. Ranchers spent days shooting cattle they had raised for years. Mass burial pits were dug and filled.

There was little national news coverage of the prairie fires, nothing like the constant, detailed reporting California wildfires receive. But that didn't matter. When rural America heard about the devastation, it responded without hesitation. The fires began on Monday; by Wednesday, trucks loaded with hay were rolling in, and they kept coming for weeks. Volunteers repaired fences, farm and ranch organizations sent financial support, and neighboring states delivered food and veterinary supplies. The outpouring of help from rural communities was nothing short of extraordinary.

In the end, the fire burned more than **451,000 acres in Kansas alone**, the largest wildfire in the state's recorded history, according to the Kansas Division of Emergency Management.

To burn or not to burn" it may sound like a simple question, but for the First Responders charged with protecting every resident in the county, it is anything but simple. It's the question that keeps them up at night. They know that something as small as a single spark can destroy so much, so quickly.

Fire does not ask permission. It does not wait for preparedness. It takes only moments for a quiet afternoon to become a life-altering disaster.

These events remind us that responsibility begins long before flames appear. Every decision matters every precaution counts, and every act of awareness can prevent a tragedy. The story of this fire is a reminder—not of what was lost, but of what we must protect, together.

Phillips County Kansas Controlled Burning Frequently Asked Questions

How do I know if I am allowed to burn within Phillips County?
Contact the Sheriff's Department, 785-543-6885, to determine whether controlled burning is permitted. Phillips County Emergency Management monitors conditions daily and updates the Sheriff's department on burning restrictions.

Do I have to call the Sheriff's Department prior to each burn?
Yes, you MUST contact the Sheriff's Department BEFORE you start any burning operations. First, to determine if burning is permitted and secondly, so dispatch can track the location of the burn. Finally, you must call again once your fire has been extinguished. This ensures that if someone calls in after the fire has been extinguished dispatch knows it is no longer monitored or controlled.

How can I determine if the weather conditions are optimal for burning?
Verify the current and predicted weather conditions with the National Weather Service (https://www.weather.gov/). Search your location by adding the zip code. Optimal burning conditions are light winds (less than 15mph), high humidity, and low temperatures.