

# Wildfires threaten ranches

## Hot and dry conditions spark aggressive fire behaviour

KATE AYERS

SPENCES BRIDGE – Hot, dry and windy conditions persisted at the end of July, causing the Shetland Creek wildfire to grow exponentially and devastate the agricultural region of Venables Valley.

“I’m beyond frustrated for all the loss that has occurred within the last 12 hours. I am so sorry for the people of Venables Valley with having not much warning and for the potential catastrophic losses they may endure,” 60 Ranch owner TJ Walkem posted to Facebook on July 18. “I’m sorry to my range mates and neighbours that most likely [will] endure the same losses we will have. Driving into a wall of fire from one mountain top to the other is something I hope no one has to experience. We rode hard and fast and got what we could. On to tomorrow to find a new home for these poor animals.”

The Walkem family was not immediately available for an interview, but posts on social media indicate extensive losses of cattle and grazing land as a result of the fast-moving fire.

Discovered July 12, the Shetland Creek fire – like 58% of wildfires in the province this year – was sparked by lightning. It originated as a 5,000-hectare fire 7.5 kilometres northwest of Spences Bridge. On July 17, it merged with the Teit wildfire to create much larger and more dangerous conflagration.

It was one of 345 active wildfires in the province at press time, and one of four

wildfires of note. The other three included Aylwin Creek and Komonko Creek in the Kootenays as well as Antler Creek in the Cariboo.

An update from the BC Wildfire Service on July 22 indicated the fire had travelled north parallel to Highway 1 towards Ashcroft. Over the preceding two days, extremely aggressive fire behaviour between North and South Venables Road caused crews to retreat to safety zones because of the risk of getting trapped.

On July 22, the fire was listed as a 19,942-hectare fire of note and the highway was closed in both directions for public safety. The Village of Ashcroft and areas of Cook’s Ferry Indian Reserve were under evacuation orders, with hundreds of properties evacuated, and a further 2,000 people were under evacuation alert in the Venables Valley.

BCWS had 120 firefighters, 10 helicopters, 20 pieces of heavy equipment, an incident management team and structure protection resources on site.

Structure loss has been reported but the full extent of damage is still unclear, says Amanda Ellison of Thompson-Nicola Regional District’s Emergency Operations Centre.

“We did some preliminary damage assessments yesterday,” she said on July 22. “We still don’t know the full extent or haven’t confirmed the full extent, but it does look like there have been some structures lost and we’re still thinking in that range of around 10.”



Rescuing cattle from the fast-moving Shetland Creek wildfire has been emotionally and physically taxing for ranchers, says TJ Walkem. | FACEBOOK / TJ WALKEM

Ellison did not comment on livestock losses but said that the EOC is working closely with the ranching community.

Amidst these stressful and challenging times, community spirit has prevailed to help ranchers save as many cattle as possible.

Walkem thanked those who helped get the word out and offered support, “dropping everything and getting out into some dangerous country right now

to help save as many lives as possible.”

The fire’s aggressive behaviour meant nothing could be taken for granted.

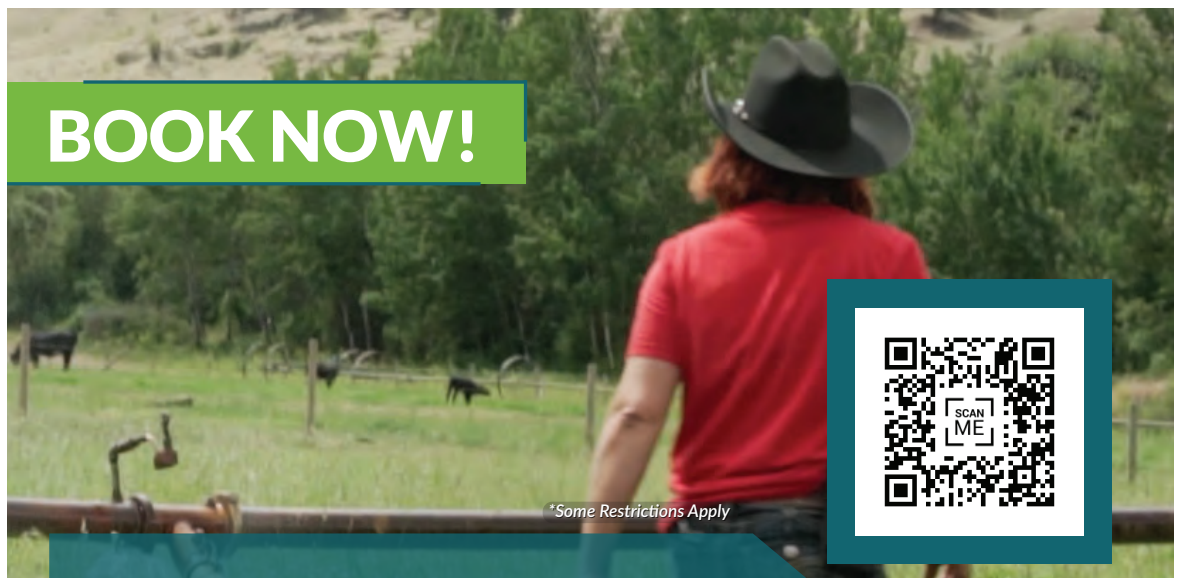
“This has been an extraordinary couple of days and it’s not over yet,” he wrote July 21. “We are constantly trying to stay ahead, but the last few days it seems like catch up and trying to salvage what we can. This fire is very unpredictable and moving so fast.”

Weather forecasts for the

final week of July promised hot and dry weather for the region, raising fears of aggressive burning conditions with increased fire behaviour.

Wildfires this year have burned 740,724 hectares in BC as of press time. The majority, or nearly 700,000 hectares, are in the Prince George Fire Centre.

“Medium range spotting will continue with forecasted winds and as fuels remain dry and susceptible for ignition,” BCWS said.



BOOK NOW!



GAP 2 COR AgSafe



Certificate of Recognition

GAP analyses help identify opportunities for improvement in workplace safety programs.

1-877-533-1789 | AgSafeBC.ca

**FIXation Clover**  
 Winterhardy Annual Clover  
 Essential ingredients for your cover crop program.

**Order Now 1.800.282.7856**

- Bio-massive cover crop
- Widely adapted
- High yielding
- Highly palatable
- Adds nitrogen
- Very Economical

Visit [Fixationclover.com](http://Fixationclover.com)