

HOUSE TAXATION COMMITTEE
Testimony in Support of HB2464
January 12, 2022

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Remarks - House Taxation Committee on Tax Exemption due to Four County Fire

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I would like to start with remarks from Ronald Reagan when he addressed the Future Farmers of America in July of 1987. Reagan explained that when he was in Las Vegas to address the annual Farm Bureau meeting, a fellow recognized him and asked what his plans were in Las Vegas. After Reagan's explanation, the gentleman asked: "What are a bunch of farmers doing in a place like Las Vegas?" Reagan replied, "Buster, they're in a business that makes a Las Vegas crap table look like a guaranteed annual income."

Of all the perils that confronted the early day pioneer in Kansas, the prairie fire ranked first by a large margin. They could wipe out crops in a matter of minutes without regard to person or station. In 1859, a hunting party explored an area ravaged by fire, the grass, and hills black as far as the eye could see. The party pressed on, eventually pushing through a small tributary which led them to a site abundant in water, timber, and bison. It is recorded that one of the hunters described the site as Paradise and the tributary became known as Paradise Creek.

December 15, 2021 was just another windy day in Kansas, although we had been warned for over a week that a significant weather event was on the horizon. Due to an ongoing drought and high winds, the fire level was extreme. Little did I know that 12 hours later, not only was my home gone, but also the ranching business I'd spent the last 40 years building. The 350 Registered Angus cows that I spent my life genetically breeding would never be the same.

My wife often states that our cattle are our employees. Not only do we take care of their interests before our own, but they also create a product we merchandise as our only source of income. As of today, we lost a third of our employee base, and anyone in business will tell you the economic impact of losing that, coupled with the Covid era supply chain issues, and resulting inflation on all building costs doesn't excite anyone's prospect on rebuilding.

The state seal of Kansas containing the words AD ASTRA PER ASPERA, "to the stars through difficulty", defines the design that it emblazons. In the foreground of the picture, Kansas agriculture is represented by a settler's cabin, showing agriculture's importance as the basis of Kansas' future prosperity. I still believe that Agriculture is the defining vision of our state.

As a member of the volunteer fire department in Paradise, I remember the events of the day vividly. I had just eaten lunch and was finishing up some Angus heifer transfer paperwork in my home office when I smelled smoke. I had accidentally left my phone in my truck and ran from the house telling my wife I would call her when I knew more. My fears of the day became reality when I learned that a fire had started 7.5 miles Southwest of the ranch and was headed right toward our ranch. My wife, Susan, and daughter, Sarah, who was home after completing her first semester at law school, were greeted soon after by the Sheriff, demanding their evacuation from our family home. I was intent on trying to save what I could. I began flooding the lawn with water, hoping the fire would spare it. After an hour in the dark black haze and 30-degree weather, I got an update from my fellow firefighters that the fire had gone north, and it looked like our land would be saved.

However, Mother Nature had other plans. The wind shifted and multiplied in strength. I fell to my knees, holding hope that my efforts would result in returning home at some point. Our ranch dog, Archie, would not leave the ranch that day. I tried to get him in my truck, but he refused, and I had to leave. The last thing I did was leave him in the seat of our ATV, parked in the gravel driveway. My wife called and asked if I could save her engagement ring. I ran back into the house, only to return to my friend and fire chief telling me that I had to leave now or face certain death.

As we finally evacuated Paradise and headed east, I knew the house and ranch were gone, and our cattle were in danger, but seeing the damage the next day was devastating. At 6AM, my wife and I pulled into the remains of the ranch headquarters. The smoke was still thick in the air, but through it, I saw that some life survived. Our ranch dog, Archie, was still huddled in the seat of the ATV where he rode out the blaze.

After a tearful reunion, my wife and I proceeded to find the bred heifers that had been burned alive the night before. Driving through the pastures, we were horrified to see their scorched bodies that had nowhere to escape. Euthanizing the critically injured was a job that I couldn't face alone, and thankfully had help from fellow ranchers. Watching the cattle, you've spent a lifetime caring for suffer and bawl in pain is what I believe to be the most gut-wrenching and heartbreaking experience a rancher can face. Those that survived were taken in by our closest friends, family, and neighbors.

A young man who was reporting on the fires begged me to talk with him. I told him I couldn't do it and he demanded that I tell my story, so I did. He shared the video on YouTube, titled "The largest wildfire no one knows about but why you should." In the rawness of the morning, I realized how important it is for people that have no idea where their food comes from to understand and have an awareness of what we do and the risk we take to do it. It's part of it, it's what we do. The young man choked up, stating "You feed America." I replied: "We try, we try."

God spared my family, my best 40 cows, and the knowledge that the agricultural community is strong. I have received calls as far away as Georgia to help with friends and family and fellow producers offering to bring resources for the surviving cattle.

Neighbors who also suffered tremendous losses set up daily meals at the church along with a make-shift store to get people anything from shoes to toilet paper. When people read the news and wonder if there are any good people left, send them to Paradise.

Ranchers are a breed of people who are there to help others but hate asking for help themselves. I am one of those people. Today, I stand before you broken, everything I have worked for burned by flames, but humbled knowing that I have to ask for help. This fire not only destroyed all my personal belongings but has also taken one third of my future business earnings.

I am asking you for help today in the form of a sales tax exemption on all fencing done as a result of this unforeseen disaster. Our ranch alone has 28 miles of fence so that the herd can return to the green grass that I know will be restored. This fence comes at a cost of \$20,000/mile to rebuild. We are committed to building back. To the stars through difficulty will embolden our cause. Kansas Ranchers are strong, but we need your help.

I'll end with another quote from President Reagan: "I'm afraid that we're never going to be able to fully come to grips with the problems that weather creates for the farmer. We can, however, do our best to eliminate those problems the government creates for farmers."

Thank you for your time today.