



By Gary Frasier

# Frasier's Philosophy

After spending a good portion of my life in the West, I tend to think of wildfires as a summer phenomenon, and once the weather cools down, the fire danger is over. It is quite a surprise, as I am writing these notes, to be listening to the news a few days after Christmas and hear about major wildfires outside of Dallas, Texas, burning homes. We must remember that wildfires can occur any time there is a source of fuel and the weather conditions are correct.

It does not take a storm to start a fire. Many wildfires are started by man and burn when there are no storms in the area. These fires are very dangerous. In March 1985, a farmer in southwestern Nebraska decided to install a center-pivot irrigation system in an area that was covered with waist-high dry grass. There was a moderate wind of 20–30 mph from the northwest and a temperature in the low 50s. The installer lit an acetylene cutting torch and proceeded to cut a piece of metal. Within a few minutes, there was a roaring fire in the dry grass, heading to the southeast, with nothing but grass for 10 miles. Directly in the path of the fire, behind a small hill, was a neighbor's house. This was at a time before cell phones, and there was no way to notify anyone about what had happened. Several people in the area saw the smoke and notified the local rural fire department 20 miles away. The neighbor realized there was a problem when he smelled smoke coming into the house. He went outside and climbed into his pickup to get a better look. After driving a few hundred feet, he stepped out of the pickup and collapsed from smoke inhalation. Some local neighbors who were coming to help fight the fire saw what had happened. The fire department radioed for an ambulance and rushed him to the hospital 20 miles away. He did not survive the night. A tragedy, which could have been prevented, had occurred. The man was my father.

The story is not unique. Similar stories occur almost every year. I would encourage everyone to read the book review and the articles by Heather Smith Thomas in this issue about wildfire happenings in Idaho.

There are times when a properly managed fire can be a useful range-management tool. The theme for this issue of *Rangelands* is "Fire and Wildfire." Fire can be both a blessing and a curse. We have articles that look at both sides. Don't let it turn into a tragedy. ♦