By Jan Rahn
Managing Editor

Fueled by ferocious winds, approximately 10,000 acres of anything in its path was destroyed by a wildfire at the end of last week in Keith and Perkins counties.

According to Paxton Fire Chief Kyle Gartrell, three homes (two of which had residents) and 11 structures, along with a combine, tractor and grain cart were lost in the path. Livestock were singed by the fire but survived, he said.

Homes destroyed belonged to the families of Welch and Orr, according to Gartrell.

Still under investigation, the fire was first reported one mile north of Interstate 80 at mile marker 138 between Roscoe and Paxton at 2:10 p.m. on Thursday, Oct. 18.

Winds of 40 mph accompanied by 60 mph gusts made the fire fighting battle tough for the 25-to-30 volunteer departments that responded.

Gartrell praised the efforts of the firefighters and all of the other volunteer help that responded. Farmers with disks joined the effort.

“Everyone provided wonderful help. It’s what small town rural America is all about,” said Gartrell.

Gartrell said calculating the amount of property and crop loss in the wake of the fire is just in the beginning stage.

Each department in Perkins County had equipment and personnel respond, including Grant, Venango, Madrid and Elsie.

Grant Fire Chief Don Softley said firefighters from Grant, Madrid and Imperial saved a house in Keith County at Roads 20 and Q as a fire storm rolled through, destroying the shop and chicken house on the property.

Softley said in Perkins County he was involved with personnel from the sheriff’s office, state patrol and game and parks who did a remarkable job in evacuating people in the diagonal path of the fire that was raging from northwest to southeast.

Perkins County firefighters had been called earlier to provide mutual aid for a fire southwest of Sutherland that ultimately burned approximately 500 acres. While en route to that fire, all Perkins County firefighters were diverted to a structure fire at the Sam Lee residence southeast of Madrid. While fighting the fire at the Lee homestead, the dispatch came through for the wildfire that started between Roscoe and Paxton.

According to Softley, farmers with tractors and disks were who stopped the fire at Road 768 and 348 in Perkins County. Softley said 16 tractors with disks deserve the credit because there was no way for fire department personnel to get to the head of the fire—they were busy protecting the structures in the path of the blaze.

He said firefighters from the Sandhills were called in to help Keith, Deuel and Lincoln county fight the fire in their district, while Grant called in departments from Arapahoe and west to Colorado, including McCook and Bartley, to come north to help.

People evacuated from their homes between I-80 and the Keith-Perkins County line, between Paxton/Elsie Road and County Road East P. Residents were allowed back into their homes Friday morning.

According to Softley, two Grant firefighters were treated and released from Perkins County Hospital, one with eye injuries, the other from exertion in helping evacuate horses that were trapped in a corral. Paxton's fire chief was treated at the Ogallala Hospital for eye injuries.

Softley said the recent fires that Grant personnel responded to put numbers at only a half dozen shy of "doubling" the historical record for responses within a calendar year by the Grant Volunteer Fire Department.