



# Northern Wyoming Wildfire Explodes To Nearly 200,000 Acres, Others Also Burning

A wildfire burning out of control in northern Wyoming east of Buffalo has exploded and is pushing 200,000 acres. Ranchers are scrambling to help fight that and other wildfires in the area to save their homes and animals.



**Clair McFarland & Jen Kocher**

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Huge plumes of smoke from the House Creek Fire as it burns past the home of Ashley Malcom near Buffalo, Wyoming. Malcom said the fire moved fast, but thankfully missed her property. (Courtesy Ashley Malcom)

As he rushed toward a huge wildfire that's now burned more than 163,000 acres and remains uncontained in rural Johnson County in his water truck Thursday, Tyler Scales saw an antelope on fire in the distance.

"I've seen dead antelope, antelope walking around burning," said Scales, a Johnson County rancher who has been awake since Wednesday morning — except for a two-hour nap — fighting the House Draw Fire with other volunteers. "The fire's moved faster than I've ever seen before and jumped the interstate. You kind of feel helpless: can't do nothing."

The Johnson County House Draw Fire is the largest of several in Northern Wyoming on Thursday, with personnel and volunteers in Sheridan, Campbell, Fremont, Weston and Converse counties also fighting back blazes. Lightning started the fire, about Wednesday.

Driving toward a cloud of smoke while speaking to Cowboy State Daily by phone, Scales said volunteers and workers on scene were assessing the fire's scope Thursday morning.

One fire started in Trabing, Wyoming, then lightning knocked down a telephone pole in the Schoonover area and both fires connected, then roared across the interstate, said Scales.

“We got lucky,” said Scales, adding that some ranchers lost nearly everything: ranches, cows and buildings.

### Still Raging

The House Draw Fire stretching between Clearmont and Kaycee remains uncontained, Johnson County Fire Department reports. It has spread to 163,466 acres and is burning sagebrush and grasslands while showing “extreme behavior,” the department said in a Thursday email to Cowboy State Daily.

Sixteen engines, 13 dozers or blades, and two helicopters. An air-travel restriction is in place for aircraft and drones.

Johnson County Fire Control District 1 is fighting the blaze along with Clearmont Fire, Powder River Fire, Wyoming State Forestry, Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest service. Seventy firefighters are deployed.

Evacuation orders are in place north of Interstate 90 from Tipperary Road to the northern and eastern county lines; in Buffalo near the Buffalo Sussex cutoff, in Prairie Land Village and between Cook Road and I-90, the department said.

Interstate 90 and Highway 59 were open to local traffic only Thursday, as are county roads Cook, Tipperary, Irigary, Nine Mile and the Sussex Cutoff. The Wyoming Department of Transportation announced I-90’s reopening late Thursday.

No injuries have been reported.

The fire is threatening 60 structures, including miles of fence, oil and gas infrastructure, water tanks; along with sage grouse and mule deer habitat and livestock. No homes have been lost, but a few outbuildings had been burned as of Thursday at 2 p.m., the department said.

The Bomber Mountain Civic Center was open to displaced residents Wednesday and early Thursday, but no one came to use it, Jimmy Cataline, Johnson County Emergency Management coordinator, told Cowboy State Daily.

“I’ve shut the shelter down – didn’t have anybody coming in,” he said, adding that he will reopen the shelter if there’s a need.

The fact that no one showed up to the public shelter could indicate how tightknit and hospitable the community members are with one another, Cataline said.



## Homemade Rig

Jason Williams of Aladdin, Wyoming, took his truck with a skid-mounted fire unit on it to fight fires in Weston County overnight Wednesday, he confirmed to Cowboy State Daily.

The weather was hot and dry with not enough rain and too much lightning, he said.

“It’s been a nightmare,” said Williams.

He said Weston County Fire Marshall Dan Tysdal and the volunteer firefighters “have been kicking ass along with guys with little units like me. Quick action by everyone has stopped some potentially horrible situations.”

Federal authorities also called in support, he said.

Weston County Emergency Management posted photos of at least four local fires to its official Facebook page, later noting there have been at least 14 this week. The agency shared a Thursday midday post by Weston County Public Health announcing that there were no immediate threats and no evacuations in the county at that time.

## Homestead

Mary Throne’s family’s ranch in Campbell County is charred, but firefighters saved the 1913 homestead house from the Flat Rock Fire off of Echeta Road.

Throne is in Cheyenne much of the year, serving as chair of the Wyoming Public Service Commission. A man is now renting the Gillette-area ranch, but she still visits it during summer and hunting season.

“It will always be home,” said Throne.

She was up all night after a neighbor alerted her that the fire had encroached the family land. At first, the fire looked like a typical lightning-sparked grass fire, she said. But her neighbor soon messaged that residents were evacuating the area.

The homestead was out of harm’s way — at first.

“Then the fire turned and now, thanks to the neighbors and firefighters taking care of structures, our house is fine,” she said.

She lost some buildings and some grass, however. Four horses pastured near the home are fine after authorities cut the fence to release them and a neighbor later rounded them back up.

Throne said she’s thankful to her neighbors and those fighting the fires.

“And I hope things calm down today,” she said.

## Things Are Not Calming Down

The two largest fires now raging in Campbell County are the Flat Rock Fire near Throne’s place and the Constitution Fire farther north, off of Highway 95.

Both are larger than [Watchduty.org](#) now says they are, Stuart Burnham, Campbell County fire marshal, told Cowboy State Daily on Thursday.

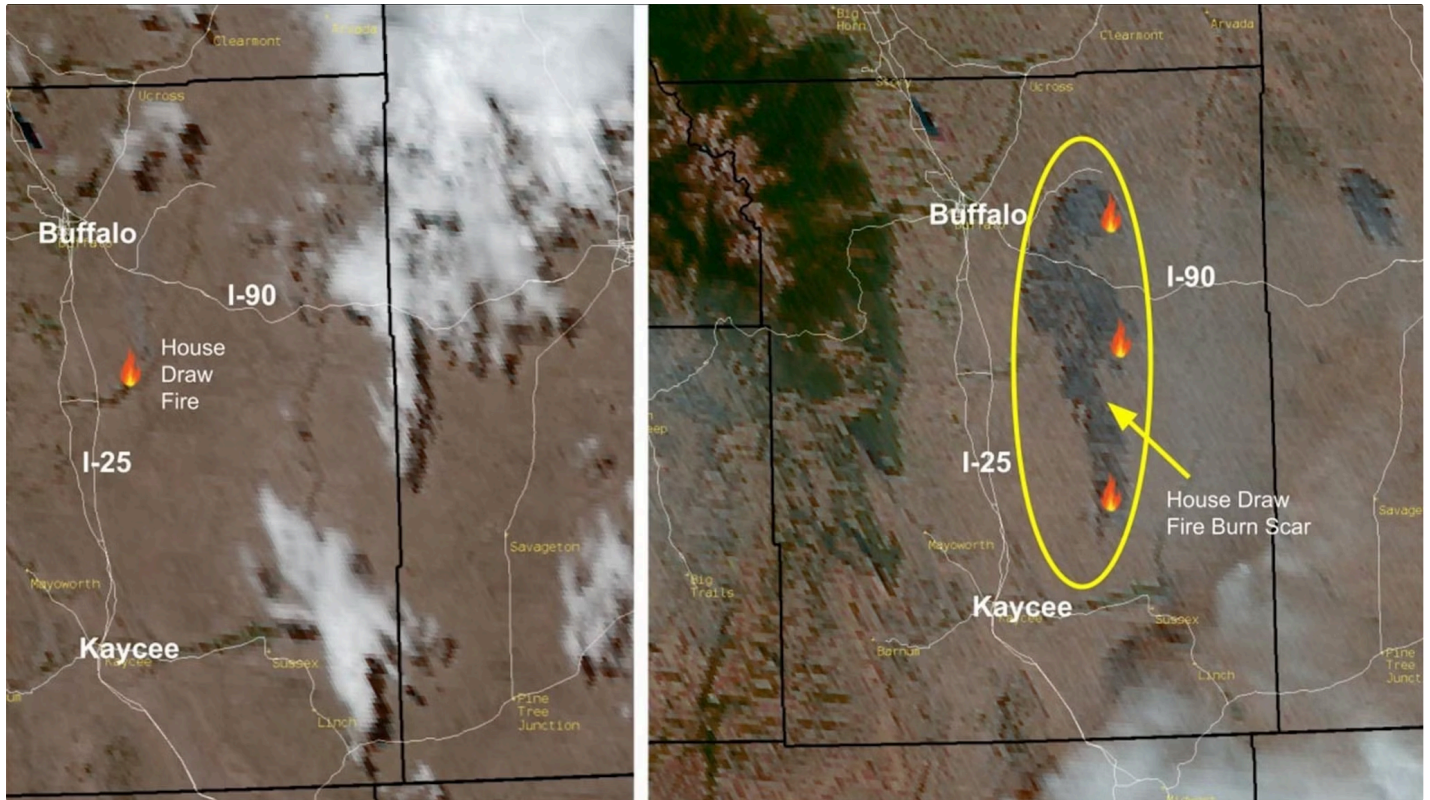
The Constitution Fire roared after nightfall. Burnham expects it to far exceed the 3,000 acres at which it was estimated Wednesday.

Estimated at 500 acres Wednesday, the Flat Rock Fire is also expected to be much larger than that as of Thursday afternoon. Indeed: by Thursday evening Burnham said the Flat Rock was at 30,000 acres; the Constitution had quintupled to 15,000.

Winds were picking up again Thursday, though not with as much fury as they unleashed Wednesday, Cowboy State Daily Meteorologist Don Day said.

Burnham said firefighters are focusing on saving many structures in the Flat Rock Fire. Though it’s smaller, it involves far more structures, including residential, than the more-rural Constitution Fire to the north, he said.

He said no injuries or fatalities have been reported.



The area covered by the House Creek Fire on this map produced by the National Weather Service office in Riverton, Wyoming. (Cowboy State Daily Staff)

### That Dozer

Jason Erhart Carter, a Campbell County resident, thanked JW Equipment and Sales in a Thursday post to Facebook for delivering a bulldozer to his home so he could carve a fire line with it.

Ben Torkelson, employee at JW Equipment, confirmed that the company had a bulldozer delivered up north toward the Constitution Fire.

Burnham said anyone deploying privately owned equipment should coordinate with the fire department to ensure organizational safety.

### Too Early For Sunset

Shanna Firnekas was on the phone with a friend Wednesday afternoon when the vibrant pink and orange clouds caught her eye. It was too early for the sun to be setting, which she noted to her friend.

"There's no way that could be a fire, right?" she said. After all, they'd just lost their barn in the Coal Creek Fire a few years ago.

Then, about an hour later, her son told Firnekas that his friends were not going to be able to make it to their place that afternoon for bull riding practice because a fire in Buffalo had shut down I-90 between Johnson County and Gillette.

The family owns 5F Bucking Bulls and keep 30 bulls on their property off Box N Ranch Road, south of Highway 50, in Campbell County.

She walked her daughter calmly through the necessary steps of packing their bags in the event of an evacuation order and getting a game plan in place to move the bulls, Firnekas said.

That pre-evacuation order came about three hours later when her three children called to say the fire jumped the interstate and was about five miles away to the northwest. The family decided they were better safe than sorry and made plans to move the bulls into town at Cam-plex in Gillette, which had opened up its corrals and pastures for livestock.

Meanwhile, the couple deliberated whether they should just turn around and come home. In the end, the boys coordinated with their friends to get all the bulls moved into town, which took them until 3:30 a.m. as the parents supervised from the road.

They kept the kids on the phone as they instructed them to turn on the sprinklers around the house and instructed them to be ready to leave if necessary while checking in with their neighbor for updates.

It was a sleepless night, but in the end, everyone was safe and nothing burned, which unfortunately, she noted, made them a lot luckier than others who have lost outbuildings and homes as the fire continues raging.

"We're just so thankful," she said. "And when we get back, we'll see how we can help those folks out."

Firnekas said that as of 12:45 p.m. Thursday, they remain under a pre-evacuation notice with the fire moving along Wendover, parallel to I-90.

### **If Anyone Needs**

In Rozet east of Gillette, Jamie Black stood poised Thursday waiting to hear if others needed help. She put a post on Facebook Wednesday night, offering her family's pastures and corrals to anyone who needed a temporary home for their livestock.

As of Thursday morning, nobody had taken them up on the offer, but she told Cowboy State Daily she is ready should anyone reach out. She estimated they had space for about 100 head with an additional small pasture nearby.

It all happened so quickly, Black noted, and wanted to lend a hand to anyone in need given that there are few options for many people under the circumstances.

"It's bad enough to lose your land," she said, "and we don't want them to lose their livestock, too."

They'd had a small fire on their place earlier this summer that caused minimal impact, she said, but they were so touched by the outpouring of support from their neighbors that they wanted to help give back.

"We can't be out there fighting the fires, but we can help from the sidelines and do what we can that way," she said.

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"It is emotionally wrenching to see this, but again, I am so thankful to the firefighters for saving our 1913 homestead house. It will always be home," wrote Mary Throne of her charred ranch in Campbell County. (Courtesy Photo)

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