

**OKLAHOMA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE,
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Devon Energy presents pickups to two
families impacted by wildfires

Wildfires that ripped across areas of the Oklahoma Panhandle and northwest Oklahoma in early March generated much destruction.

However, the hours, days and weeks since have yielded a steady stream of acts of goodness and kindness directed toward those farmers and ranchers impacted by the wildfires.

That continued on Wednesday as Devon Energy presented a white 2012 Chevy 1500 Extended cab, four-wheel drive pickup to R.A. and Susan Bentley near Laverne, Okla., and a white 2012 GMC 1500 Extended cab, four-wheel drive pickup to Roy D. and

Ilajoy Covalt near Woodward, Okla. The producers also received items from Nash area farmers and ranchers such as hay and fencing materials.

R.A. Bentley rubbed his fingers over the keys to the pickup and said, “This is just more than you could ever expect. I didn’t expect it. Wow. Just wow.”

After receiving his pickup Roy D. Covalt took a few steps away and then turned around to look at the gift and said, “My, that pickup. That’s just incredible.”

Christina Rehkop, Allison Bailey and Ethan Nall represented Devon during the presentation of the pickups to the wildland fire victims on Wednesday. Also on hand was Oklahoma Secretary of Agriculture Jim Reese, who coordinated the donations along with Jeff Jaronek of the Oklahoma Cattlemen’s Foundation.

“Devon is an Oklahoma company,” said Allen Wright, Devon’s vice president of public and government affairs. “When we see our fellow citizens suffering from a tragedy, we want to get involved. We’re glad this donation can help two hardworking families get back on their feet.”

Out of the ashes

Anyone can ask R. A. Bentley about what he lost in the fire.

Bentley's polite enough and will answer the question, but the 48-year-old won't stop there.

He lost some cattle – cows and calves. He lost a John Deere combine, not a new one, but a “nice combine.” He lost a small dozer. The shed burned, as did a Ford tractor. A tandem axle grain truck was destroyed. A trailer to haul a combine header was lost as well.

Remember though, he's not stopping with the losses.

“Foremost, I just thank Jesus for saving all the lives,” said Bentley who lives near Buffalo but grew up on a ranch three miles north of where the fire claimed all those possessions near Laverne. “It's just a God thing that we didn't have 20 funerals. We could have. The next thing that amazed me is just the goodness of people. I've had people from South Dakota, friends that showed up. I've had churches, like from Stillwater. Those who say, ‘Is there a need here? We want to do something.’ There are just a lot of good people out there that want to help. They don't do it because they want credit, it's pretty neat. It's been a real blessing. I just can't thank people enough, I can't thank God enough.”

And he thanks God for those people. He's thankful for those such as the officials of Devon, who gave him a pickup because they had a pickup and Bentley had a need.

Again, he appreciates good days like Wednesday, because this rancher knows March 6 could have been so much more tragic.

That day, Bentley and some others started up on one side of the fire trying to help neighbors and then had to circle around and come up from the south toward his brother, L.D. Bentley's place.

When they arrived, the fire was about a half-mile from the house, so "we jumped out." They headed different directions trying to save different equipment.

"I started trying to get tractors out of the shed, because I knew what was going to happen," R.A. Bentley said. "I got a tractor out. My brother-in-law showed up and jumped in another tractor. We got two tractors out and drove those into a field of beardless triticale. It was green, it wouldn't burn. We thought, 'We'll just go back. We'll get the rest of the stuff this will be simple, no problem.' Well, it wasn't quite that simple. By the time we got back, the shed was on fire. I was trying to get stuff out. We couldn't get it. It just burned. I sat there in that field of triticale with my brother-in-law, two county road grader operators. We couldn't go anywhere. It burned right up to his house. It should have burned, there's no reason it shouldn't have burned."

As a rancher, Bentley's familiar with facing all sorts of challenges. However this year has introduced him to things he

wasn't so familiar with. Even though his father Raymond Bentley died back in 2003, his mother Lorene just died in February. Then within a few weeks came this horrendous wildfire. This experience has adjusted the way the Oklahoma native looks at life.

"I'll just say it," Bentley said. "I told my wife this the other night and you'll think I'm nuts, I said, 'You know honey here's the deal, I've got to cry more, I've got to hug more people and I've got to pray with people.' I'm not a big mushy guy that goes around and tells people I love them and I need them around, I just don't. I do, I love them, but I'm just not a mushy kind of a dude. I told my wife, 'I have not enjoyed losing a single thing, I can't say that I have, but if as many people are impacted for Jesus as I believe have been, then it has truly been worth it. That's not me saying that, that's a God thing. That is truly how I believe."

This is home

Roy D. Covalt stands 5-feet, 8 inches tall.

"The flames were probably 7 to 8 feet high and they weren't probably, oh, a hundred yards from us," the 84-year-old said. "Never in my life have I seen a fire like that."

On March 6, Roy and Ilajoy his bride of 56 years were out feeding cattle for a cousin who rents some land from them.

They saw the fire, but “it was burning low, probably about 3 feet high” and not threatening the couple, Roy Covalt said.

Then the wind shifted. It had kicked up to somewhere in the 50 mph-range. It was no longer “burning low.”

“All of a sudden we couldn’t see,” he said, “and the smoke was just unbearable.”

They managed to get out, but the closest path back to their house was blocked by a wall of fire. So they took the long way home, more than a little frantic that their twin sons Wilbur Gail and Wesley Dale Covalt, 56, might be caught up in the fire at the parent’s house.

When Roy and Ilajoy got close to the house, fire departments were already in the area. Firefighters told them they had seen the twins move some equipment out and the sons were safe. The structures and other equipment hadn’t fared so well.

This beast of a wildfire devoured Roy and Ilajoy’s two-story house they built in 1980 and the sons’ house not far away. The wildfire destroyed two shop buildings, a blue 1999 Ford three-quarter-ton four-wheel-drive pickup, a baler and a swather. Also, a total of 24 cows and calves were killed.

Gone as well were decades of photos and other pieces of the past, including the coffee table the twins had built for their Dad and Mom.

“They worked a long time on it, it was something,” Roy Covalt said. “It sat right there out in front of the fireplace, off to the side a little bit. We had a lot of company through the years for big meals and everybody liked that coffee table.”

At times, his voice strains with emotion.

However, it’s usually not when he’s talking about what they lost, but rather what they didn’t lose and how they have been blessed.

“The number one thing I tell them all, is that we all got out of it, we’re all here to talk about it,” Covalt said. “Number two is that we live one day at a time and need to enjoy every minute of it.”

He was definitely enjoying himself on Wednesday upon receiving the pickup from Devon.

“I don’t know how to describe what we’ve seen overall, people have just been tremendous,” he said. “The pickup and the other things today are just incredible.”

At this time, the Covalts are living in Woodward, but that’s temporary.

The rubble will be cleared out on the farm and they’ll rebuild. Ilajoy grew up on this land. This is where the deer and the wild turkey come through and where the couple walks down to the creek about 150 yards from the house.

“This is home,” Roy Covalt said.

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Photo caption: Doug Fitch, of the Grant County Conservation District, Christina Rehkop of Devon, Ilajoy and Roy Dale Covalt and Ethan Nall of Devon are shown as Devon presented a pickup on Wednesday near Woodward to the Covalts who were impacted by the wildfires.



Photo caption: Jeff Jaronek of the Oklahoma Cattlemen’s Foundation, Secretary of Agriculture Jim Reese, Christina Rehkop of Devon, Susan Bentley and R.A. Bentley and Ethan Nall of Devon are shown as Devon presented a pickup on Wednesday near Laverne to the Bentleys who were impacted by the wildfires.

