

Panhandle churches help in wildfire recovery

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Weeks after firefighters contained the largest wildfire in Texas history, Panhandle churches are ministering to their neighbors as they continue recovery and begin rebuilding.

The Smokehouse Creek Fire, which began Feb. 26, scorched more than 1 million acres. The Windy Deuce Fire and Grape Vine Creek Fire, which started the same day, burned about 180,000 acres. Area ranchers lost more than 7,000 cattle.

The fires did not destroy any church buildings in [Top O' Texas Baptist Association](#), but some church members were affected, Director of Missions James Greer said.

"People are going into the rebuilding stage now," he said.

Prefabricated homes and mobile homes have been moved into the area. In some cases, construction of new homes has begun.

'People are moving on'

"So many people from so many places brought in so much help," said Bob Bynum, pastor of Locust Grove Baptist Church, near Canadian. "The recovery is going well. ... People are moving on with their lives."

Churches in the association—and some beyond the area—collected about \$200,000 to assist families in recovery, Greer said.

About a half-dozen families with ties to First Southern Baptist Church in

Fritch received benefits from the associational fund, said Charles Watson, chair of deacons at the congregation.

The church in Fritch housed disaster relief volunteers with Texans on Mission—formerly Texas Baptist Men—in the immediate aftermath of the fire.

“We had about 130 people sleeping in our building, and they set up trailers for laundry and showers here,” Watson said.

Texans on Mission dedicated more than 12,800 volunteer hours, helping to demolish more than 50 damaged structures and clearing 86 sites. Volunteers prepared more than 4,300 meals and washed more than 250 loads of laundry for the community. They distributed 120 Bibles, more than 2,000 bottles of water and about 500 boxes.

The Texans on Mission volunteers logged 723 hours operating heavy equipment and helped [direct the delivery of donated hay](#), livestock feed, salt licks and fuel to farms and ranches.

‘Can finally breathe again’

Recognizing a need at First Southern Baptist Church in Fritch and out of a desire to repay the hospitality they had been shown, Texans on Mission provided the church’s children’s ministry with a [playground](#). Individual volunteers donated funds to purchase playground equipment, and a crew from Paramount Baptist Church in Amarillo installed it.

“They really helped us out,” Watson said.

In recent days, traffic has “tapered off” at the storehouse the church established to provide canned goods, bottled water and cleaning supplies to families affected by the wildfire, he reported.

Rather than continue to keep the storehouse open during prescribed hours each week, it is now made available upon request when a family in need contacts the church.

Watson is providing much of the day-to-day leadership at the church at a time when the congregation is without a pastor or minister of music and youth. The church has enlisted supply preachers, and the congregation is moving ahead and planning summer activities, he noted.

“We’re recuperating,” he said. “I feel like I can finally breathe again.”