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Blaze levels buildings on Town of Grafton farm, kills cattle in beef herd

Authorities are investigating the cause of a fire that destroyed a barn and killed several cattle in the Town of Grafton last week.

A HAY-FUELED FIRE destroyed an 84-year-old barn and an attached building on the John Norman farm in the Town of Grafton last week. Photo by Sam Arendt

The fire leveled an 84-year-old, two-story barn and an attached building on the John Norman farm, 1396 Falls Rd., on Thursday, Oct. 20.

Firefighters from Grafton and six other area departments battled the blaze for several hours after being called to the scene at 7:47 p.m.

Grafton Fire Chief John Place said the fire is believed to have started in the smaller building and spread quickly to the barn, igniting large quantities of hay stored in each structure. Dense smoke filled the air, traveling for miles throughout the area.

“By the time I got to the scene, the outbuilding was fully engulfed and the barn was about one quarter engaged,” Place said.

“When that amount of hay gets going, it burns very quickly. Not much could be done to save either building.”

In an effort to contain the blaze, firefighters tried to remove as much hay as possible from the barn, Place said. An excavating firm brought equipment to the scene to remove and spread bales, which were then doused as quickly as possible, he added.

No people or animals were inside the buildings at the time of the fire, but more than a dozen beef cattle were enclosed in a pen outside the barn. Some of the animals escaped the blaze, but nine or 10 were killed, said Norman, who was raising about 50 head of cattle at the farm.

Norman said he was at home having dinner when he was notified of the fire.

“The firefighters got there within four or five minutes. They did everything they could,” he said.

Place described the blaze as “one of the largest barn fires we’ve had in Grafton.” A passerby called 911 after seeing flames and smoke at the scene, he said.

“No one was in danger, so our biggest concern was pulling the contents out of the barn as fast as we could,” Place said.

Firefighters from Port Washington, Saukville, Cedarburg, Thiensville and Mequon responded to the scene along with Milwaukee Fire Bell Club volunteers who assisted the emergency crews.

No one was injured, and the fire was contained to the two buildings, Place said.

Place said members of his department remained at the scene for more than eight hours and returned for several hours later Friday and Saturday to continue extinguished smoldering hay and ruins.

Both buildings were leveled. However, Place said though the barn did not collapse into its foundation, allowing some items stored in the lower level to be retrieved.

A nearby milk house was undamaged.

The cause of the fire remained undetermined early this week. Norman said an electrical problem in the smaller building may have triggered the blaze.
Norman is a longtime farmer who ran a dairy operation on the property for many years. When he discontinued the dairy farm in 2005, it was the last of its kind in Grafton.

Norman said he was unsure what he will do with his current farm or if the barn will be rebuilt.