

## 'The worst disaster in Midwest City history'

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[Midwest City Police Chief Brandon Clabes](#) watched towers of flame and smoke rise over homes in several neighborhoods Thursday evening.

As wind-whipped wildfires spread out of control, every blowing ember became a potential threat. Every home's rooftop was potential kindling for the next fire.

Clabes said he can't think of a disaster where more [Midwest City](#) residents had their lives or homes put in danger. About 100 homes were destroyed, authorities said.

"This is probably the worst disaster in Midwest City's history, even worse than the May 3, 1999, tornadoes," Clabes said.

No serious injuries were reported in Midwest City.

"But I don't think we're going to have these fires out anytime soon. They're out of control," Clabes said Thursday evening, adding the fires rekindled as fast as they could be put out because of the winds.

A grass fire that burned two acres near SE 15 and [Buena Vista](#) was extinguished around 3:00 Friday morning, according to Midwest City fire department officials.

[Jerry Lojka](#), Midwest City fire spokesman, said fires Thursday were leapfrogging from

home to home as high winds carried burning embers to rooftops. The Turtlewood, Windsong and Oakwood additions were those most affected by the fires near SE 28 and [Westminster](#). Oakwood East was the worst hit, he said.

Flames moved too fast for firefighters to keep up in many cases, Lojka said.

Lojka said all 89 of Midwest City's firefighters were fighting the fire late Thursday, which officials believe is the first time in the city's history its entire force has been deployed to one fire.

No serious injuries had been reported by 10 p.m., Lojka said. Some residents had been treated for smoke inhalation and some firefighters were treated for dehydration.

Authorities sent residents in the evacuated areas to the Midwest City Community Center, where about 100 people were staying Thursday evening.

[Shannon Kaelin](#), who lives in the Oakwood East addition, said a police officer knocked on her door and told her to get out as fast as she could. She said she grabbed her daughter, purse and cell phone and got into her car, but the prospect of leaving seemed more frightening than staying.

Kaelin, 37, said trees were burning and flames shot up more than 30 feet into the air as she drove down the street leaving her neighborhood. Struggling to see amid smoke and bumper-to-bumper traffic, Kaelin said she could feel the heat from the fire as she crept along in the slow-moving traffic.

"I was so scared, I didn't know if we should jump out of the car and run," Kaelin said.

The first fire in Midwest City was reported about 3 p.m. at SE 29 and Post Road with winds coming from the southwest.

"The fire keeps rekindling because the wind is blowing 25 to 30 mph in different directions," Clabes said. "Firefighters can't get a handle on it at this point. ... It's a concern by the fact you've got all these fires that are laying in this thick brush that is rekindling. When the wind shifts directions, it will blow into those areas that have not yet burned."

[Mary Chilcoat](#) said she was in her home watching the fires on television when a firefighter knocked on her door and told her she needed to evacuate. The firefighter brought her to the community center. She said she is worried about her home in the 600 block of S Anderson Road.

Chilcoat said she was only able to take her purse with her from her house, where she has lived since the 1970s.

Rochelle and [Frank Respicio](#), both 35, couldn't go home when they got off work because of the evacuation. They said their neighbors turned on sprinklers for them, but they worried about their dogs, Trixie and Pedro.

"We're just praying everything's going to be all right and we're not going to be here all

night," [Rochelle Respicio](#) said.

[Ryan Griswold](#), 21, and his sister went to the Midwest City command center at Westminster Road and SE 29 to pick up his cousin's children.

Griswold's said his family had been preparing to evacuate, but they were never forced to leave. His cousin, however, was asked to evacuate his home, so Griswold came to pick up his children for now.

"This is just like the (May 3, 1999) tornadoes, only it seems to be lasting a lot longer," Griswold said.

At 10:45 p.m., the fire's leading edges in Midwest City were near SE 15 and Indian Meridian Road and the 2000 block of S Hiwassee Road, Lojka said. He said the best-case scenario for when firefighters could have the blaze under control was midnight or 1 a.m., but it may be well into today before crews knock it down.

Firefighters could not get into the areas with the heaviest flames because the brush was too thick.

About 9:30 p.m., winds began to shift from the south and west to the north.

"With any luck, the wind shift will slow this down but we don't know," Lojka said.

"There are houses that are still burning. This isn't a safe place for people to be."

## Fallin visits

[U.S. Rep. Mary Fallin](#) visited with officials at the Midwest City command post to see what kind of assistance the federal government could provide. She will tour the area by helicopter today, she said.

"I'm not surprised at the outpouring of assistance throughout the state," Fallin said.

"Oklahoma does a super job when it comes to emergencies and people pulling together."

Contributing: *Staff Writers Jesse Olivarez, [Robert Medley](#) and [Brian Sargent](#)*

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