

# TORNADO: Destroys buildings, mows down trees near Sundance



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Published: Wednesday, July 15, 2009 12:39 PM MDT

Tears welled up in Duane "Sonny" Queen's eyes as he recounted his reunion with his wife, Allison Duane Queen, after the tornado struck his home Monday.

He'd been in Spearfish, S.D., when he heard the news that a tornado had hit his house in the Bearlodge area of the Black Hills, while his wife was still inside.

As the 78-year-old Sundance area rancher raced home, he could only think about his wife. "I was just worried that I'd never see her again," he said.

As he approached a turnoff to his house, a neighbor stopped him and took over the rest of the drive. "It's bad. It's really bad," the neighbor said as they drove through the carnage of fallen trees.

The first destruction he saw was his shop, which had become a pile of twisted metal. Farther down the road, he saw the trailer home of his tenant, Ali Wiheln, which was wind-shorn and with almost every window broken out. He noticed that his tractor trailer, where he stored personal items, was no longer there. It, a pickup truck, and a U-Haul truck had blown into the creek below.

Just around corner was the house he's lived in since 1948. It was demolished.

The sight shocked him, but his only concern was to see his wife, who was further down the road at a neighbor's place.

"We just walked up and hugged each other," he sobbed. "I told her I loved her."

### **Strength of the tornado**

It was toward the end of the tornado when the buildings at the Queen Ranch fell.

The tornado started south of Cook Lake in the Black Hills National Forest and moved east down a draw for more than nine miles before it ended east of the Queen Ranch.

The amount of damage inflicted on the home indicated that the tornado had a strength rating of EF2 on the Enhanced Fujita scale, which is a rating for tornados from EF 1 to EF 5.

It might have been stronger before it hit the Queen Ranch but that is a guess because the damage west of the ranch was mostly to trees rather than structures, said Susan Sanders, warning coordination meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Rapid City, S.D.

The EF2 rating is based on the amount of damage inflicted and the strength of the winds, Sanders said. The 120 to 130 mph wind speeds at the ranch blew debris across the countryside.

A substantially built three-story barn filled with hay was completely decimated at the Queen Ranch. The reach of the debris from the barn gave the National Weather Service most of the data needed to support the EF2 rating.

The twister did not cause as much damage to man-made structures as the F2 tornado that hit Wright in 2005. That tornado mostly damaged mobile homes, and those that took the brunt of it were not tied down, Sanders said.

"The storm formed and it was just the right environment (for a tornado)," Sanders said.

The tornado destroyed at least six structures — five of which were on the Queen Ranch. Another home further west, called the Madison place, was damaged.

### **Not-so-happy campers**

Upton resident Keith Engel, 64, was fishing on Cook Lake about 500 yards from his camper when he saw clouds start to swirl. He immediately ran back to his camper as the wind started to blow and the rain fell.

His granddaughters, his wife and he huddled in the camper as the day turned dark from the storm.

They didn't know it at the time, but less than a mile south of them, the tornado mowed down its first trees.

The storm lasted about a half hour. When it was done, they ventured back out and saw the Ping-Pong ball-sized hail.

Other campers told them they saw softball-sized hail at one of the higher campgrounds.

The next day, campground host Laura Mulford came by and told them that all roads out of the lake were blocked by trees that fell during the tornado, and that they would have to stay until they were cleared. They finally were able to get out about 2 p.m. Tuesday.

"It definitely ruined the landscape around Cook Lake," Engel said.

"I thought it would be cool to be in a tornado and live," said his 10-year-old granddaughter, Aubrey. "But this is the closest I ever want to be."

About half of the 36 campers who occupied 10 sites during the tornado had vamoosed as soon as the roads were reopened Tuesday, Mulford said.

The campground suffered minimal damage, but there was one camper who had stayed in a tent who had a close call when a tree fell and landed on his picnic table before rolling down and grazed the side of his tent. He took off immediately after that.

"He came down here and the first thing he said was that he wanted his money back," Mulford said.

Normally, the Forest Service doesn't grant refunds, but in his case, Mulford made an exception.

Mulford has been the campground host for six years. She compared the tornado to a flood that happened at the campground the previous year, but it was nothing compared to the damage up the road.

"Everything looks pristine here but as you go up, there's more and more damage until it looks like a clear cutting," she said.

### **The lucky ones**

On Monday, Ali Wilhelm sat on his couch at the Queen Ranch watching the news and saw that a tornado would be heading his direction.

He went to close all of his windows when suddenly several beams that were stacked across from his home started flying around and slammed into his mobile home.

One of the beams went right by his stomach as he raced back to the bedroom. He hung on to a door, but the wind was so strong it dragged him across the room.

Tuesday he began picking up some of the bigger pieces of debris. Because the power lines were down, he started a generator to keep his refrigerator running.

Glass from his windows lay everywhere.

"It's going to be work," the 77-year-old retired sausage maker said.

Back at the Queens' home, family members arrived to start the clean up. Neighbors stopped by and power company workers came and went.

The couple waited for the insurance adjuster to arrive and survey the damage.

Allison recalled the previous night. She had been sitting in the living room watching TV when she saw the insulation from her roof start to fly around the yard.

After it was all over, she just wanted her husband by her side. When she saw her husband again that night, she was just glad that he was home.

"When he found the big barn gone, it was quite a shock to him," she said.

On Tuesday, several of the ranch's animals were scattered around their ranch property. Cats made a temporary home in the scattered hay. Two of their livestock were taken to a vet after they noticed that they were hurt.

The amount of debris and cherished heirlooms that were strewn around the property was enough to devastate the couple.

"When you think about it, everything we own is on the ground," Allison said.

## **FIRE AND SALVAGE**

### **Fire Danger**

Thousands of trees that fell Monday after the tornado in the Bearlodge area of Black Hills National Forest could pose a fire danger in the coming months ahead.

In the next two months, the pine needles will dry out and they will cause worries about fire danger, said Bearlodge District Ranger Steve Kozel.

"My concern is that people are very careful with fire in here," Kozel said.

A stray match in wrong spot could create potential circumstances for a large fire, he said.

But there will be even more concern once the needles fall off and the wood starts to cure, which could take a couple of years.

"We're going to have resource concerns over the next two to five years," he said.

If the weather turns hot and dry, there is a possibility of special fire restrictions in the area, Kozel said.

Kozel and his crews had worked most of the day Tuesday to clear major routes to Cook Lake.

The crews used the same natural disaster system they would have used if it were a forest fire, but the devastation caused by the tornado also has different hazards than a fire.

Because of all of the trees, some of which could be unstable or others are sprung up from the falling trees, there is a possibility of restricting travel to the roads in order to protect the public, Kozel said.

### **Tree salvage**

The Forest Service has not made any plans to salvage the fallen trees for consumption, Kozel said.

The flattened areas include about 4,500 acres of forest where trees have been uprooted or broken off.

The service will evaluate the value of the trees. The trees will quickly deteriorate if left on the ground.

He expects that the active timber areas will see the quickest salvage efforts. The Forest Service will evaluate the value of the trees, which are less than normal because the lumber is damaged.

"We just have to look at it from a contractual standpoint and go from there," Kozel said.