

# Cost of Vantreight Farms fire could be over \$300,000, says farm owner

BY SANDRA MCCULLOCH, TIMESCOLONIST.COM SEPTEMBER 21, 2012



Ryan Vantreight shows some of the damage after the fire in the greenhouse, which also suffered damage.

**Photograph by:** Bruce Stotesbury, timescolonist.com (September 2012)

A devastating fire that levelled a storage area at Vantreight Farms in Central Saanich on Wednesday evening has sparked an outpouring of community support, deeply touching the family behind the 128-year-old business.

“We’ve had a lot of tradespeople and community businesses offer to help [rebuild],” said Ryan Vantreight, the fifth-generation general manager of Canada’s largest daffodil grower.

The fire started outside a storage area at about 7 p.m. and spread quickly up stacks of black plastic trays and machinery. Black smoke rose high over the Saanich Peninsula, attracting a crowd of onlookers. The cause of the fire has not yet been determined. Central Saanich fire and police are investigating.

The cost of the blaze “could be in excess of \$300,000,” said farm owner Ian Vantreight, Ryan’s father.

Ryan was at home on the farm, putting his three children — ages five, two, and one month — to bed when he got a panicked call from his father.

The blaze took off quickly, Ryan said.

“Once it got going, there was no way of stopping it,” he said. “I felt helpless. There was absolutely nothing we could have done about it — it was gone before it started.”

Ian and Ryan were assisted by a Good Samaritan who used a forklift and chains to move equipment away from the flames. On Thursday, Ryan said the family would like to thank the stranger for his help.

Crews from the Central Saanich fire department were assisted by North Saanich and Sidney firefighters and equipment, but there was an immediate problem getting water to the site as curious motorists were impeding firefighters laying down 3,600 feet of four-inch hose.

"There were people and traffic all over the place and a lot of times we couldn't get by," said Central Saanich Fire Chief Ron French.

Central Saanich police were called to handle traffic, but even they had trouble reaching the site due to all the cars.

"People were leaving their cars literally in the middle of the road to take pictures," French said.

The delay in getting water concerned the Vantreights, who wonder what would have happened if their main warehouse — the core of the farm's operations — caught fire.

"We would have lost it," Ryan said.

An old piece of logging equipment reconfigured to treat daffodil bulbs was of special concern because it can't be easily replaced. Firefighters were urged to douse the machine with water, but it still suffered damage.

Ryan was awake until 2:30 a.m. Thursday, fielding phone calls and emails from the community. He's been urging people who want to help to buy local produce, thereby supporting local farmers.

The fire was "a bit of a speed bump," but the Vantreights will continue to operate despite the loss, Ryan said.

It was difficult to see a farm that prides itself as an organic, environmentally safe operation be the origin of so much black smoke caused by burning plastic, he added.

"Our carbon footprint has been set back a few years," Ryan said.

He said the challenges the family has faced over the past few years — the Vantreights have been embroiled in a prolonged fight with the Ratepayers of Central Saanich over a bid to put 57 houses with secondary suites on 13 hectares off Wallace Drive — were dwarfed by the support they received.

A B.C. Supreme Court justice in April ruled a bylaw drafted by Central Saanich approving the subdivision was legal, but there are still some in the community who harbour bad feelings.

"This tragedy could have been worse and thankfully it wasn't worse," Ryan said. "The community is there to catch us if we need them."

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