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WICHITA, Kan. — A heat wave that has pushed temperatures well over 100 degrees has killed tens of thousands of turkeys and chickens in Kansas and North Carolina and left farmers across the lower part of the country struggling to cool off their flocks.

In North Carolina, about 50,000 chickens died at a farm after the power went off for less than an hour. In Kansas, one couple lost 4,300 turkeys that took 26 hours to bury.

“It felt like a war zone. It felt like hell,” turkey grower Holly Capron said.

The heat wave that started over the weekend has been spreading east. Four of the nation’s top turkey-producing states - Arkansas, Missouri, North Carolina and Virginia - were under a heat advisory Tuesday. Arkansas and North Carolina are also leading chicken producers.

Temperatures in Kansas on Sunday reached 110 degrees, with a heat index of 118. It was 106 in the buildings near Columbus where Capron and her husband raise 22,000 turkeys for Butterball LLC. She said they’ve been running big fans and fog nozzles in their poultry buildings, and they’ve had a tractor pulling a spray wagon to water down the birds. They lost 140 birds on Saturday, but nothing prepared them for Sunday, when 4,300 died.

After receiving approval from state regulators, the Caprons, their workers and friends began digging a massive hole - 60 feet long, 40 feet wide and 10 feet deep - to bury the nearly 50-pound birds. They started at 11 p.m. Sunday, and the last turkey was buried 26 hours later. The crew worked around the clock. No one slept.

“It was literally overwhelming during the night,” Capron said. “I honestly wanted to start crying. My husband was in shock.”

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She blamed the deaths on a heat spike that hit about 5:30 p.m. Sunday. The Kansas Department of Agriculture’s Division of Animal Health confirmed that heat, not disease, caused the deaths, department spokeswoman Chelsea Good said.

In North Carolina, the heat wave killed about 50,000 broiler chickens at a Johnston County farm when the power went out for about 45 minutes, said Gary Rhodes, a spokesman for Colorado-based Pilgrim’s Pride Corp., which owned the chickens.

Farmers in the Carolinas outfit their poultry barns with cooling systems that use fans to push mists of water over the birds or pull air through the sheds at high speed like an air tunnel. The cooling systems have prevented family-owned turkey growers Prestage Farms from suffering a mass die-off from heat for more than five years, said co-owner Scott Prestage.

“If outside the heat index is at 107, like it is right this minute, the bird in that house is feeling something that tends to be in the mid to high 80-degree range,” said Prestage, whose operations produce more than 425



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