

Disaster Preparedness for Livestock

Why Livestock Owners Need to Be Prepared

Disaster preparedness is important for all animals, but it is particularly important for livestock because of the animals' size and their shelter and transportation needs. If you think that disasters happen only if you live in a flood plain, near an earthquake fault line or in a coastal area, you may be tragically mistaken. Disasters can happen anywhere and can take many different forms, from barn fires to hazardous materials spills to propane line explosions, and train derailments—all of which may necessitate evacuation. It is imperative that you be prepared to protect your livestock, whether by evacuating or by sheltering in place.

Take Precautions

Make a disaster plan to protect your property, your facilities, and your animals. Create a list of emergency telephone numbers, including those of your employees, neighbors, veterinarian, state veterinarian, poison control, local animal shelter, animal care and control, county extension service, local agricultural schools, trailering resources, and local volunteers.

Include a contact person outside the disaster area. Make sure all this information is written down and that everyone has a copy.

Make sure every animal has durable and visible identification.

Ensure that poultry have access to high areas in which to perch, if they are in a flood-prone area, as well as to food and clean water.

Reinforce your house, barn, and outbuildings with hurricane straps and other measures. Perform regular safety checks on all utilities, buildings, and facilities on your farm.

Use only native and deep-rooted plants and trees in landscaping (non-native plants are less durable and hardy in your climate and may become dislodged by high winds or broken by ice and snow).

Remove all barbed wire, and consider rerouting permanent fencing so that animals may move to high ground in a flood and to low-lying areas during high winds.

Install a hand pump and obtain enough large containers to water your animals for at least a week (municipal water supplies and wells are often contaminated during a disaster).

Identify alternate water and power sources. A generator with a safely stored supply of fuel may be essential, especially if you have electrical equipment necessary to the well being of your animals.

Secure or remove anything that could become blowing debris; make a habit of securing trailers, propane tanks, and other large objects. If you have boats, feed troughs, or other large containers, fill them with water before any high wind event. This prevents them from blowing around and also gives you an additional supply of water.

If you use heat lamps or other electrical machinery, make sure the wiring is safe and that any heat source is clear of flammable debris.

Label hazardous materials and place them all in the same safe area. Provide local fire and rescue and emergency management authorities with information about the location of any hazardous materials on your property.

Remove old buried trash—a potential source of hazardous materials during flooding that may leech into crops, feed supplies, water sources, and pasture.

Review and update your disaster plan, supplies, and information regularly.

Sheltering in Place

If evacuation is not possible, a decision must be made whether to confine large animals to an available shelter on your farm or leave them out in pastures. Owners may believe that their animals are safer inside barns, but in many circumstances, confinement takes away the animals' ability to protect themselves. This decision should be based on the type of disaster and the soundness and location of the sheltering building.

Survey your property for the best location for animal sheltering. If your pasture area meets the following criteria, your large animals may be better off out in the pasture than being evacuated:

No exotic (non-native) trees, which uproot easily

No overhead power lines or poles

No debris or sources of blowing debris

No barbed wire fencing (woven wire fencing is best)

Not less than one acre in size (if less than an acre, your livestock may not be able to avoid blowing debris).

If your pasture area does not meet these criteria, you should evacuate. Whether you evacuate or shelter in place, make sure that you have adequate and safe fencing or pens to separate and group animals appropriately. Work with your state department of agriculture and county extension service. If your animals cannot be evacuated, these agencies may be able to provide on-farm oversight. Contact them well in advance to learn their capabilities and the most effective communication procedure.

Evacuation Planning

The leading causes of death of large animals in hurricanes and similar events are collapsed barns, dehydration, electrocution, and accidents resulting from fencing failure. If you own farm animals, you should take precautions to protect them from these hazards, no matter what the disaster potential for your area.

Evacuate animals as soon as possible. Be ready to leave once the evacuation is ordered. In a slowly evolving disaster, such as a hurricane, leave no later than 72 hours before anticipated landfall, especially if you will be hauling a high profile trailer such as a horse trailer. Remember: Even a fire truck fully loaded with water is considered "out of service" in winds exceeding 40 mph. If there are already high winds, it may not be possible to evacuate safely.

Arrange for a place to shelter your animals. Plan ahead and work within your community to establish safe shelters for farm animals. Potential facilities include fairgrounds, other farms, racetracks, humane societies, convention centers, and any other safe and appropriate facilities you can find. Survey your community and potential host communities along your planned evacuation route.

Contact your local emergency management authority and become familiar with at least two possible evacuation routes well in advance.

Set up safe transportation. Trucks, trailers, and other vehicles suitable for transporting livestock (appropriate for transporting each specific type of animal) should be available, along with experienced handlers and drivers.

Take all your disaster supplies with you or make sure they will be available at your evacuation site. You should have or be able to readily obtain feed, water, veterinary supplies, handling equipment, tools, and generators if necessary.

If your animals are sheltered off your property, make sure they remain in the groupings they are used to. Also, be sure they are securely contained and sheltered from the elements if necessary, whether in cages, fenced-in areas, or buildings.

Farm Disaster Kit

Make a disaster kit so you have supplies on hand in the event of a disaster. Place the kit in a central location and let everyone know where it is. Check the contents regularly to ensure fresh and complete supplies. Include the following items, then add items that you use every day:

Current list of all animals, including their location and records of feeding, vaccinations, and tests. Make this information available at various locations on the farm. Make sure that you have proof of ownership for all animals.

Supplies for temporary identification of your animals, such as plastic neckbands and permanent markers to label your animals with your name, address, and telephone number.

Basic first aid kit.

Handling equipment such as halters, cages, and appropriate tools for each kind of animal.

Water, feed, and buckets. Tools and supplies needed for sanitation.

Disaster equipment such as a cell phone, flashlights, portable radios, and batteries.

Other safety and emergency items for your vehicles and trailers.

Food, water, and disaster supplies for your family.

Your local humane organization, agricultural extension agent, or local emergency management agency may be able to provide you with information about your community's disaster response plans.