

Stable  
Management VOLUME 23

# EXTRA

## PREPARING YOUR BARN FOR NATURAL DISASTERS



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Whether facing a fire, tornado, flood, or other natural disaster, having a plan in place ahead of time can prevent or reduce the impacts of these events.



PIXABAY

# Preparing for Natural Disasters

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Perhaps you find yourself living in one of the few places in the USA where there are no, or only relatively rare, natural disasters. However, for the bulk of the country, significant climate events are becoming not just more frequent but increasing significantly in intensity. Not a day goes by lately that there isn't news of some destructive flood, fire, hurricane, or tornado that wreaks devastation on all in its path.

It is hard enough to get you and your family out of the way of an oncoming inferno, raging water, vicious hurricane, or tornado winds. But when you have animals, the stress is compounded.

Smaller animals are manageable and easy to leash or gather into a carry crate and evacuate with you. But what do you do with your horses, especially when there is neither time to load and trailer them out, or there is no longer road access to do so?

Each natural disaster has its unique circumstances. Usually there is advance forecast warning about a developing hurricane. In some cases, a wildfire may be approaching but not yet in close proximity.

That is not always the case. Floods can develop over days or be so rapid in onset that people perish from the inability to flee. A tornado warning rarely gives sufficient time to evacuate and even if you do, there is no telling which way the tornado will veer and potentially intersect where you are or where you may head on the road.

I will preface this by saying that in September 2013, two storm systems backed up against the Rocky Mountains to create a 500-year flood event that impacted our small town in the Colorado foothills. It took 2-1/2 days to develop into a catastrophic situation but even with that much "warning," we never dreamt it could turn into what it did.

In essence, we had only hours to pack up what seemed reasonable, including the cat, and head to higher ground. Luckily, our horse property did not at that moment have a horse on it. The only recourse would have been to just open the gates and let them find their own way to high ground because there wasn't time to load and haul elsewhere. Besides, the roads were completely washed away in hours.

Wildfires have also caused us to evacuate at least three times in the last decade. These series of natural disasters have prompted us to develop an evacuation plan that is written on paper, produced in triplicate, and posted for easy access in the house and barn.

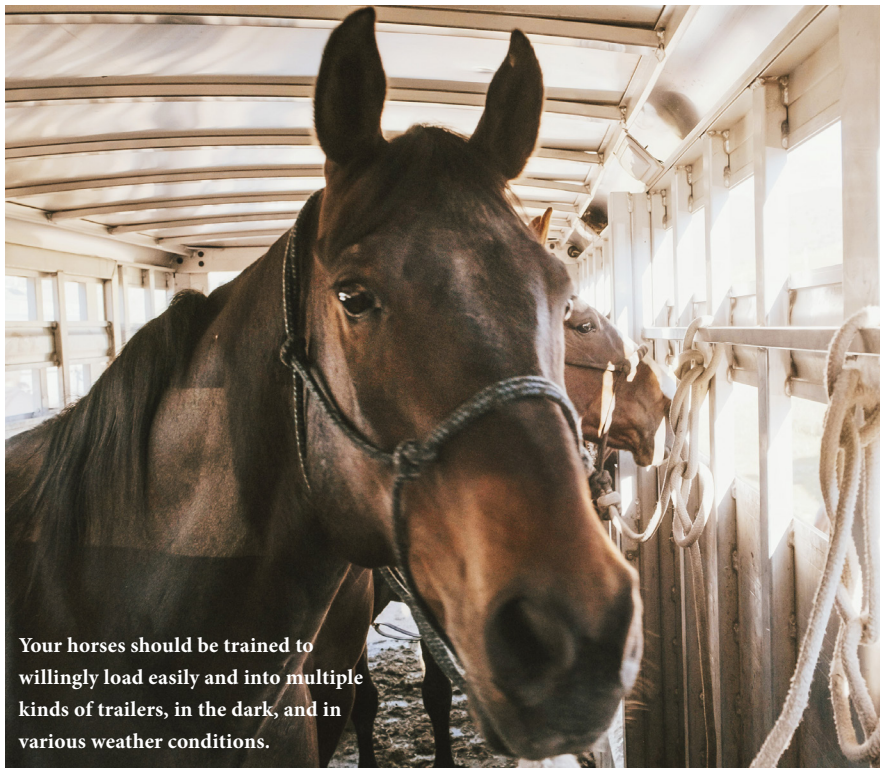
Let's look at some possible strategies you can plan in advance to be horse ready for a natural disaster calamity, no matter what it might be.

## Community Involvement

First off, if you live in a horse-loving community, it is a good idea to set up or get in touch with a group that responds to these kinds of emergencies.

In my county, search and rescue and animal control are organized to alert a cadre of horse lovers who respond immediately by bringing horse trailers to the vicinity of a fire or flood.

In a recent small fire that was fairly quickly contained, a main road nearby was backed up as a staging area with drivers and horse trailers ready to evacuate animals in need. There's a phone tree



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notification system to those who sign up to be alerted to the need for their efforts. It also helps to have advance communications with a local fairgrounds and/or boarding facility where evacuated horses and other livestock can be taken. Volunteers typically bring in hay and buckets for feed and water.

If there is even an inkling that your property may be affected by an active disaster, it is always best to err on the side of caution and take your horses somewhere safe before you are overwhelmed by forced evacuation. That might mean a trailer ride for your horses to a safe haven, and then soon thereafter the horses can return home.

Getting the horses to a secure location allows you to concentrate on the needs and evacuation of your family, and/or help friends and neighbors who are in peril.

Before a catastrophe happens, survey your property and assess the risks relative to various natural disaster events. Mitigation of the property against wildfires is important, especially to create a defensible area around the barn and house.

If your property is within a floodplain, ensure that the horses have a way out to higher ground and pasture in the event that you have to leave them on site and open their gates while you evacuate.

## Make a Plan in Advance

What preparations do you need to implement for your horses in the event of a natural disaster? Here is a checklist of initial preparations to have ready to go:

1. Have a plan of where to take your horses if evacuated and have multiple backups in case your preferred site fills up. If you need permission to bring horses there, obtain that well in advance. Leave information at your property where you and the horses are going so people aren't looking for "missing persons." Print out the address and directions to the evacuation center. Consider alternative routes if access is blocked.
2. Print out your evacuation plans with multiple copies posted in the barn, in your house, and in your trailer. In the heat of a crisis, sometimes it is difficult to think clearly so you'll want the plan to provide step-by-step, prepared instructions.
3. You need to have an appropriate-sized trailer to accommodate the number of horses you have, and/or have an arrangement with a reliable friend, agent, or county group to bring their trailer(s) immediately to your place to help evacuate.
4. A responsible horse owner should prepare for their personal equine evacuation requirements. Do not depend on others to evacuate your horses if you live in an area prone to wildfire or floods. A client boarded her horses in a wildfire-prone area without any means to move them. I asked what she planned to do if fire approached, and she replied that she would ask the neighbors to bring their trailers over to help. I informed her that from personal experience, in the midst of a wildfire evacuation, neighbors are generally wrapped up in dealing with their own emergency preparations to save their animals, personal belongings, and property. She had never even considered that.
5. Your horses should be trained to willingly load into multiple kinds of trailers, in the dark, and in various weather conditions. This takes planning and practice well in advance of a crisis.
6. Halters with lead ropes should be readily accessible for every horse by the stall, paddock, or pasture. It is safest to use leather or breakaway halters in case a horse snags itself on something and panics. Attach an ID tag (waterproof luggage tags work in a pinch) to the halter or braid it into the mane with the horse's name along with your name and contact information. In a pinch, draw your contact information onto a horse's rump using a livestock-marking crayon, or use a permanent marker to write contact info on your horse's hooves.
7. Have horse documents—insurance information, health records including vaccinations, Coggins test, brand inspection documents where appropriate, freeze brand or microchip ID documents, registration papers or other proof of ownership, and your veterinarian's and farrier's contact information—in handy reach of each horse's stall or paddock, or keep them in a safe place in the horse trailer. Keep all paperwork, documents, and veterinary care up-to-date.
8. In advance, photograph (on your cell phone) your horse with some identifying information in the picture—you or a family member, and perhaps your home with a visible address. Include pictures and notes about identifying marks, scars, and whorls so you can prove that a horse belongs to you.

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more chance of escape or the ability to reach higher ground. Use pastures with good, safe fencing, free of power lines. Remove as much debris and farm equipment from the area as possible, in advance.

5. Prepare a well-stocked first-aid kit in a waterproof container. Place one in the horse trailer and/or in the barn to enable you to take care of minor injuries—antiseptic scrub, gauze for scrubbing, antiseptic ointment, bandaging material, eye ointment, oral medication syringe, broad-spectrum oral antibiotics, oral sedative medication, as some examples. It may be days until a veterinarian can reach your property or your evacuated horses, so you'll want the ability to take care of immediate problems.

## Truck and Trailer Preparedness

1. Keep your truck and trailer in ready condition, gassed up, and with all systems working in good order: battery, lights, bearings, and a well-tuned engine, for example.
2. Hook up your trailer at the slightest sign of a potential problem so you are ready to go.
3. Check the tires for air and appropriate tread, including the spare.
4. Check that there is a jack, nut lug, and safety block for tires.
5. Check the trailer floor, doors, walls, ramp, and butt bar for integrity and safety.
6. Have flashlights ready and equipped with working batteries.
7. Load enough hay, water, and appropriate buckets into your truck or trailer to last at least 2–3 days.

## Providing Feed, Water, and First Aid

What do you need to take with your horse in the trailer or to have present if sheltering in place? Roads get knocked out, businesses shut down, and it is easy to take for granted access to basic care materials that may no longer be available.

Another checklist defines appropriate

items to include with an evacuated horse or to leave with horses stranded on the farm:

1. Plan on having at least two weeks' feed available for your target safe haven or to have on site if horse evacuation isn't possible. Store hay in a dry area, high enough to weather flooding. Some suggest having enough for 3–7 days but from personal experience, there was no road rebuilt to our town for nearly three weeks.
2. Fill water tanks or store water in plastic trash containers with secure lids. Depending on the time of year, store 12–20 gallons per horse per day. This accommodates your horse's hydration needs in the event that water is fouled with contamination or water lines are broken or there are electricity outages that preclude pumping water from a well or house connection. Chlorine bleach can be used to purify water. The EPA recommends  $\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon per gallon of water. (Double that amount if water is cloudy, discolored, or very cold. Stir and let it sit for 30 minutes.)
3. If you don't think it is possible to evacuate you and your horses, set up a generator on your property and be sure there is sufficient fuel to keep it running to enable pumping of water and keeping the lights on.
4. If the horses must remain on site, turn them out into a big area outside the barn so there is less chance of entrapment and

6. Plan in advance what your wishes are as relates to managing serious injuries for each horse. Figure out a dollar amount you'd be willing to spend to manage significant wounds, colic, and potential surgical situations. It is helpful to have this all spelled out on paper to include with your horse's other documents. Also provide a copy to your veterinarian in case you can't be contacted in a timely manner. Provide permission for euthanasia if that is the only or best humane choice so your horse needn't suffer unnecessarily.

These suggestions can help get you through an immediate calamity. It is likely that you will experience all kinds of issues to deal with upon return to the horse property, assuming it has not been overtaken completely by fire, flood, or tornadoes.

## The Bottom Line

A plan prepared in advance can mean the difference between life and death for your animals. It is a good idea to frequently review your disaster plan so that you are familiar with it and can update as necessary. In some cases, it might be prudent to rehearse (or mock rehearse) a variety of different disaster scenarios, especially if there are others who board horses at your barn, or if you board your horse elsewhere. Doing so helps sort out the kinks and fine-tunes your plan for efficient and rapid evacuation and care of your horses when faced with a natural disaster. **SM**

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