

Farm Disaster Plans

For most Americans, disaster is something we see on the evening news. Yet having a farm disaster plan can help you prevent the suffering that could occur. Preparing a farm disaster plan ahead of time can make the going a lot easier when trouble strikes.

by Carol Ekarius

Preparing a farm disaster plan is critical for owners of small and large farms alike. Every year disasters strike, leaving people and animals injured or dead, and property damage that, on a national level, runs into the billions of dollars.

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[Rely on Yourself, Not Government](#) In February, over a quarter-million residents in North Carolina went without power for several days as the result of an ice storm. A similar snow and ice storm in December left over two million people without electricity in seven states, and travelers stranded through most of the eastern half of the country.

Although the word “disaster” usually implies these kinds of big events, disasters can also be personal events, like a house or barn fire, or local events, like a chemical spill.

As a nation, we are learning about preparedness, but for those of us living in rural communities, it is especially important that we be prepared because community services are often limited, and local responders—like police, fire and medical personnel—may be many miles away, or quickly overwhelmed by the scope of a major disaster.

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[Fire Teaches Farmer Lessons the Hard Way](#)

Laurie Glauth is a rancher outside of Woodland Park, Colo. Last summer, she learned many hard lessons about disaster when the 137,000-acre Hayman fire burned through her ranch.

[Prepare a Disaster Kit](#)

Consider storing the following in large, thick plastic garbage cans with lids: Stocking water reserves should be a top priority. Drinking water in emergency situations should not be rationed. Therefore, it's critical to store adequate amounts of water for your household. Because you will also need water for sanitary purposes and, possibly, for cooking, you should store at least one gallon of water per person per day, in thoroughly washed plastic, fiberglass or enamel-lined metal containers. Sound plastic containers, such as soft drink bottles, are best. You can also purchase food-grade plastic buckets or drums. Seal your water containers tightly, label them and store them in a cool, dark place.

Food, unlike water, may be rationed safely, except for children and pregnant women. Use canned foods, dry mixes and other staples on your cupboard shelves. Canned foods do not require cooking, water or special preparation. Be sure to include a manual can opener. Replace items in your food supply every six months. Consider including ready-to-eat meats, fruits and vegetables; canned or boxed juices, milk and soup; high-energy foods like peanut butter, low-sodium crackers, granola bars and trail mix; vitamins; foods for infants or persons on special diets; cookies, hard candy; instant coffee and cereals.

Assemble first-aid kits, including manuals, for your home and for your vehicles: adhesive bandages in assorted sizes, safety pins, cleansing agents (isopropyl alcohol, hydrogen peroxide), antibiotic ointment, latex gloves, petroleum jelly, two-inch and four-inch sterile gauze pads (four to six of each size), triangular bandages, two-inch and three-inch sterile roller bandages (three rolls each), cotton balls, scissors, tweezers, needles, moistened towelettes, thermometer, tongue depressor blades and sunscreen. Also include an extra pair of prescription glasses or contact lenses. Have nonprescription drugs, like pain relievers, antacids, laxatives and cough/cold medicines in your disaster kits. If you require routine prescription medications, ask your physician or pharmacist about storing them.

Tools and other items: Include a portable, battery-powered radio and flashlight, extra batteries, signal flares, matches in a waterproof container, shut-off wrench, pliers, shovel, whistle, A-B-C-type fire extinguisher, tube tent, mess kits or paper cups, plates and plastic utensils, all-purpose knife, household liquid bleach to treat drinking water, sugar, salt, pepper, aluminum foil and plastic wrap, resealable plastic bags.

Sanitation and hygiene items: Include a washcloth and towel, soap, hand sanitizer, liquid detergent, toothpaste, toothbrushes, shampoo, deodorants, comb and brush, razor, shaving cream, lip balm, insect repellent, contact lens solutions, mirror, feminine supplies, heavy-duty plastic garbage bags and ties, toilet paper, medium-sized plastic bucket with tight lid.

Household documents and contact numbers: Have ready to go on short notice and stored in a watertight container—your personal identification; cash or traveler's checks and a credit card; copies of important documents like birth certificate, marriage certificate, driver's license, social security card, passport, will, deeds, inventory of household goods, insurance papers, immunizations records, bank and credit card account numbers, stocks and bonds; emergency contact list and phone numbers; map of the area and phone numbers of places you could go; and an extra set of car keys and house keys.

Clothes and bedding: Keep one complete change of clothing and footwear for each household member and three sets of socks and underwear, sturdy work shoes or boots, rain gear, hat and gloves, sunglasses, blankets, sleeping bag and pillow for each household member.

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She first came to the 800-acre ranch with her dad, who purchased calves for she and her brother's 4-H projects from the brother and sister ranch owners, George and Zelma Warden. Over the ensuing years, Glauth, who owns a health food store and holistic health center in Woodland Park stayed in contact with the Wardens, helping them out as the need arose.

By the time Zelma died in 2001, Woodland Park had become a bedroom community for the city of Colorado Springs, and land values were skyrocketing for prime development land like the Warden ranch, which was completely surrounded by the Pike National Forest.

"Zelma knew what she didn't want to happen to the ranch when she died, and that was development," says Glauth. "She didn't want it subdivided. She had no children, and no local family members who would work to keep the ranch a ranch, so she set up a trust for her estate, and made me the trustee."

For most of us the thought of having someone give us a ranch sounds like the dream-of-all-dreams coming true.

But for Glauth, it was a big undertaking. During the winter of 2001, she moved everything out of the main house at the ranch to perform some needed renovation work; she stored everything—furniture, clothing, antiques, journals, et cetera, in a cabin on the far corner of the ranch.

Her plan was to spend the next year or so going through the collected goods of the Warden family, and disposing of things according to Zelma's instructions.

When the Hayman fire started on June 8, 2002, Glauth was a couple of weeks behind on her work.

"Last year, I didn't realize it but the bulls got separated from some of the cows while they were out on the range during the breeding season, so we ended up with a bunch of late calves. Typically, the cattle should have been out [on a forest service allotment] on June 1st, but we were running a week or two behind, so when the fire broke out, we were just branding at the ranch.

Otherwise they would have been out on the Pike, in an area that burned at high intensity.

"The day that the fire broke out, we could see those huge white clouds rising straight up in the blue sky," says Glauth. "We didn't know what was going on until later that evening when we saw it on the news."

Over the coming days, Glauth and her brother monitored what was going on with the fire, though for the first week or so, it was far north and west of the ranch. But around June 15, the wind shifted and the fire made a quick dash to the south.

Glauth was told she had four hours to evacuate the ranch. But two hours after the evacuation notice, the wind changed again, and she was given a reprieve. Glauth decided to begin moving the animals anyway.

She enlisted the help of friends and neighbors to evacuate the cattle. The first stop was Glauth's mom's place, about seven miles south of the ranch. But that area was soon posted for possible evacuation, so the cattle had to be moved again. Troops of neighbors and area ranchers responded to help, and a rancher about 30 miles away took the herd for over a month.

On June 17th, the fire moved south again, this time burning over the ranch. By some miracle, the main ranch buildings survived, but the cabin that had the accumulated effects of the Warden's burned. And all around the building, the forest was nothing but black sticks.

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Planning Means Preparing for the Worst

One of the best ways to be prepared is to develop a plan before disaster strikes.

"You don't want to be thinking about what you're going to do in an emergency situation for the first time, as that crisis is occurring," says Lara Shane, spokesperson for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the lead federal agency for emergency response.

There are three key things FEMA urges people to do:

Have a plan. It's the most important thing you can do (see "Creating a Disaster Plan").

Have a disaster supply kit (see "Prepare a Disaster Kit").

During a disaster, listen to your local emergency managers. These officials will help guide you safely through a crisis.

If you have pets or livestock, make sure your plan addresses their needs.

Creating a Disaster Plan Learn about and evaluate what types of disasters could occur in your area. Consider the following types of natural and manmade events when doing your evaluation: floods, hurricanes, thunderstorms (including tornadoes), extreme winter events, earthquakes, mudslides, wildfires, hazardous materials accidents or terrorist incidents. Your local fire department, or county emergency services personnel can help you consider the possibilities that you may not think of on your own (for example, the fire department may know about hazardous chemicals that are transported by truck or train through your community).

Plan how your household would stay in contact if you were separated. Identify two meeting places: the first should be near your home—in case of fire, perhaps a tree or a telephone pole; the second should be away from your neighborhood in case you cannot return home. Also, identify an out-of-town contact who all family members know; this person can make sure the family's communication is coordinated. All family members should know who the out-of-town contact is, so if family members are separated during an emergency, they can all get in touch through this designated person.

Draw a floor plan of your home. Mark two escape routes from each room. Likewise, if you have a barn that animals are regularly kept in, plan escape routes.

Post emergency telephone numbers by telephones, including numbers for veterinarians and livestock handlers. Teach children how and when to call 911. If you live off main highways, post written directions to your home along with the emergency numbers, so you can clearly tell emergency dispatchers how to find your home; "turn left after the first cattle guard, then drive three miles, then turn right after the green barn," is not something you want to have to think about while the barn is burning.

Make sure everyone in your household knows how and when to shut off water, gas and electricity at the main switches. If you have to evacuate, fill the bathtub, sinks and other containers with water before you turn off the water, so that when you return, there is water immediately available for cleaning and other uses, even if the water and power are off. Consult with your local utilities if you have questions.

Reduce the economic impact of disaster on your property and your household's health and financial well-being. Review property insurance policies before disaster strikes—make sure policies are current and be certain they meet your needs (type of coverage, amount of coverage, and hazard covered—flood, earthquake, and so forth). Floods aren't covered under normal homeowner policies unless you have a flood policy. Also, review life and health insurance policies and consider saving money in an "emergency" savings account that could be used in any crisis.

Consider others. Do you have neighbors that will likely need help? Can your community use assistance in developing the capacity to meet an emergency?

Consider your animals. Where will you evacuate them to if you need to leave? If you aren't evacuated, but are facing an extended power outage, how much water will they need, and how will you supply it? A gasoline-powered generator can provide electricity during an extended power outage, both for watering your animals and for supplying electricity to your home.

Top“Animals are generally not allowed in emergency shelters, so if you have to evacuate, you need to know where you can take your animals,” says Shane.

“When you have animals, you have a responsibility to look out for them,” adds Glauth. “If you live in a wildfire area, you shouldn't plan a trip in June or July. Now, I will have a plan for how I can handle the cattle, wherever they happen to be at any given time. My neighbors know my dogs and cat are in the house if I'm gone, and they know where a key is to get them out.”

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Reducing the Chance for a Barn Fire

Although big disasters get a lot of attention, the most common disaster for farmers is barn fires. There are some steps you can take to reduce the chances of a barn fire, and to improve the likelihood that your animals will survive in the event of a fire.

Barns are usually full of highly flammable materials, like hay chaff. A stray hot ash, an electrical short or a hot engine can set off a conflagration in no time at all. Absolutely forbid smoking in and around the barn—and enforce this with guests as well as family members or employees.

Be extremely conscious when using electrical appliances or heavy equipment around the barn, and don't leave them on unattended.

Inspect electrical wiring annually.

And, probably most importantly—don't store damp hay in a barn or haymow. Hay that is put up damp can spontaneously combust!

Keep fire extinguishers near every entry point, and make sure they are up-to-date and large enough to be effective.

If you regularly keep animals stalled in the barn, consider the possibility of installing sprinklers. And invest in a good heat-and-smoke sensor with an alarm mounted outside the barn and in the house. The new sensors will pick up any sudden increase in building temperature, even if there isn't active smoke yet.

In case a fire has started, use extreme caution when entering the barn. It's a hard call to make, but ask yourself if your family can afford for you to be seriously injured or killed trying to rescue the animals.

If you think you can enter safely, evacuate first the animals that are easiest to reach.

This is another case when some pre-designed facilities will help. Construct a fenced area far enough away to safely keep the animals, but close enough so that you can quickly get animals to it if you are evacuating them from a barn.

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Rely on Yourself, Not Government

Ultimately, government emergency personnel will try to help, but it's up to you to protect yourself. Plan ahead to assess and address the risks, and take actions to reduce risks.

For example, if you live in a wildfire zone, provide defensible space by thinning brush and trees around your home and barn. If you live in a flooding area, obtain flood insurance. If you live in a tornado belt, construct a tornado shelter.

Your county emergency response personnel or local fire department can help you define your vulnerabilities, but it is really up to you to take the steps to protect yourself, your family, your property and your future.

One year after the Hayman fire, Laurie Glauth is thankful for the insights she's gained.

“There’s an inherent risk wherever you live,” she says. “But you live there because you enjoy it. There are no guarantees in life. Every day that we get into a car and drive, we take risks. There is nothing that is super safe in this world or this life, but we can’t live our lives in fear either. I think the best we can do is be prudent and observant of our environment. The best we can do is to be stewards and do what is ecologically correct for our environment.”

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