

Disaster Action Guidelines for Horse Owners

Dr. Shea Porr, Assistant Professor, Equine Science
Virginia Tech MARE Center

You should be aware that actions you take before, during and after a natural or man made disaster could save your horses' life.

Plan Ahead

- Familiarize yourself with the types of disasters that can occur in your area and develop a plan of action to deal with each type. Some disasters to consider are hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, tornadoes, severe winter weather, fire, nuclear power plant accidents with release of radioactivity to the environment and hazardous material spills.
- Survey your property to find the best location to confine your animals in each type of disaster. Check for alternate water sources in case power is lost and pumps and automatic waterers are not working after the disaster.
- Bring in your local fire department to help you assess potential issues with your barns and other structures, location of water supplies, and access to the buildings.
- Consider your insurance needs and be sure you have all the coverage on your property and animals you may need and that claims will be paid for the type of disasters you may encounter.
- Develop a “buddy system” with contacts both local and out of the potential disaster area.
- If you think you might need to evacuate your horses from your property determine several locations the animals could be taken, several routes to these locations and the entry requirements for each. Make arrangements in advance with the owner/operators to accept your horses and be sure to contact them before taking the horses there. Locations that could be used for evacuation are private stables, race tracks, fair grounds, equestrian centers, private farms and humane societies.
- Identification:
 - Permanently identify each horse by tattoo, microchip, brand, tag, photograph (4 views-front, rear, left and right side) and/or drawing. Record its age, sex, breed, and color with your record of this identification. Keep this information with your important papers.
 - Place a permanent tag with your name and phone number and the horse's name on each animal's halter.
 - If not identified at the time of the disaster in the above manner, paint or etch hooves, use neck bands or paint telephone number on side of animal.
- Be sure your horses' vaccination and medical records are written and up-to-date. As a minimum, each horse should have a current Coggins test documented. Check with your veterinarian as to what immunizations are advisable. Have documentation of any medicines with dosing instructions, special feeding instructions and the name and phone number of the veterinarian who dispensed the drug.
- Have trailers and vans maintained, full of gas and ready to move at all times. Acclimate your horse to trailers and vans.

- During disasters you may wear different or unusual clothing, so condition your horses to strange appearances ahead of time.
- Prepare an emergency kit consisting of:
 - plastic trash barrel with lid (everything fits in here)
 - water bucket
 - leg wraps
 - fire resistant non-nylon leads and halters
 - first aid items
 - portable radio and extra batteries
 - flashlight
 - sharp knife
 - wire cutters
 - tarpaulins
 - lime, bleach
- Consider in your plan the prioritizing of which animals will be saved, if all cannot be saved. Let all farm personnel know of your plans in case you are not there when a disaster occurs.
- Remember during emergencies you are taking minimum actions to assure the animal's survival. Have enough fresh water and hay on hand for 48-72 hours.
- **PRACTICE YOUR PLAN.**

At the Time of the Disaster

- **STAY CALM! FOLLOW YOUR PLAN!**
- Contact your buddies to let them know what you're doing.
- Listen to the Emergency Broadcasting System (EBS) station on your portable radio for information about how to locate horse care providers offering services during the disaster and any special instructions about actions you should take to protect your animals.
- If you evacuate and take your horses with you, take:
 - all your horses' immunization and health records; records kept at home may be damaged during the disaster;
 - your emergency kit; and,
 - sufficient hay and water for a minimum 48 hour period.
 - Call ahead to make sure that your emergency location is still available.
- If you must leave your horses unattended at home:
 - Leave them in the area most appropriate for the type of disaster you previously selected, such as high ground in a flood.
 - Leave enough water for the length of time you expect to be gone. Do not trust automatic watering systems in case power is lost.

After the Disaster

- Carefully investigate and record the facilities and structures on your farm.
 - Be careful about leaving your horses unattended outside after the disaster. Familiar scents and landmarks may be altered and the horses could easily become confused and lost. It is best to place them in a secure area.
 - Be cautious within buildings until you are certain they are structurally sound.
 - Be sure fences are intact as some may be damaged by the disaster. Check fences and pastures for sharp objects that could injure horses.
 - Be aware of downed power lines.
 - Raccoons, skunks and other wild animals may have entered the area and could present a danger to your horses.
 - Take pictures or record video of damage to your property for insurance purposes.

- If any horses are lost during the disaster contact veterinarians, humane societies, stables, race tracks, equestrian centers, surrounding farms and other facilities that might house animals. Listen to the EBS for information about groups that may be accepting lost animals.
- If you find someone else's horse after the disaster:
 - isolate it from your animals until it is returned or can be examined by a veterinarian; and,
 - use extreme caution when approaching and handling unknown or frightened horses. Work in pairs when handling strange horses.

- Check with your veterinarian, the state veterinary medical association and the Department of Agriculture for information about any disease outbreaks that may have occurred as a result of the disaster.
- Be prepared to identify and document ownership when claiming lost horses.
- Consider establishing security measures on your farm to protect assets from looters, exploiters. Contact your local police or sheriff's office for assistance.

Again, planning ahead can make the difference between an emergency being a disaster or an inconvenience, and can save the lives of you and your animals.