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Equine Emergency and Disaster Preparedness

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Catastrophic weather-related events—floods, wildfires, hurricanes, and storms—can have a devastating effect on horses as well as humans. Every year in the United States, more than 300,000 people are driven from their homes by floods. During the 2007 California wildfires, more than 1 million people and thousands of horses were evacuated. During the annual hurricane season, thousands of horses either die or are evacuated.

Some of the disasters that Kentucky horse owners may face are tornadoes, thunderstorms, electrical storms, ice storms, floods, flash floods, earthquakes, wind storms, and fire. Nobody expects to be the victim of a weather-related emergency, and so they may not be prepared when they find themselves in the midst of such an emergency.

One of the greatest costs of not being prepared is that owners may never find their animals again after a disaster. In addition, lack of preparedness puts undue strain on a rescue team, as they are faced with unmarked, untamed, and potentially unwanted horses. As a horse owner, you have the primary responsibility to plan ahead for how you will care for your horses and not rely on rescue organizations.



Horses being evacuated from a disaster area.

Developing Your Plan

Being prepared for an emergency means developing a plan that will allow you to deal with potential hazards that can threaten your safety and the safety of your horses.

A good plan begins with these important questions:

- 1. Where will you go in case you need to evacuate the area?** Your plan should include where to take your horses in case of disaster. If you own horses, ideally you own a trailer as well. If you have a two-horse trailer and more than two horses, you will have to decide which horses to take with you and which ones to leave behind. You should have all those decisions made before a disaster.
- 2. How will you put your plan into practice?** Set up your plan and discuss it with all those who will be affected by the disaster. That includes your household members, farm crew, and boarders as well. Include some drills with your group for training purposes.
- 3. Are your horses prepared?** It is important that your horses are halter-broke. Can your horses be easily caught if out at pasture? Do your horses easily load and unload from a trailer? Do your horses load and unload in the rain, in the dark, or in windy conditions? Can your horses be tied as needed? Horses that do not allow these activities under normal circumstances will be even harder to deal with under emergency situations. You—or a rescue team—will be able to move well-trained horses more easily than untrained ones. If your horses lack basic ground control, you are putting the lives of volunteers and your horses at risk.

Preparedness

Critical aspects of being prepared include keeping your horses up-to-date with vaccinations, deciding on ways to identify your horses, and ensuring that you will be able to prove ownership of your animals after a disaster.

Vaccinations

The American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP) considers certain vaccinations as part of its core vaccinations. As such, these need to be part of every horse's annual vaccination schedule. They are tetanus, eastern and western equine encephalomyelitis, West Nile virus, and rabies.

Regarding tetanus, the great majority of tetanus cases occur due to a puncture wound, although many times no one can find a wound. When disaster happens and there are metal parts and nails everywhere, the chance of your horse getting injured by a puncture wound is very high. Therefore, you need to keep your horse's tetanus vaccine up-to-date. (As a horse owner, you also have a high chance of being injured, so you need to talk to your doctor about receiving a tetanus vaccine as well.)

Eastern and western equine encephalomyelitis and West Nile virus diseases are examples of vector-borne diseases, meaning they are spread by mosquitoes. These diseases affect not only horses but humans as well. Mosquitoes reproduce in water. In case of floods and storms, the surface water accumulation will be increased, and the chance for spreading these diseases will be intensified.



Example of leg bands as temporary identification (photos courtesy of Stolen Horse International Inc.).



Example of neck collar that can be used as temporary identification.

Animal Identification

Another important part of your plan is to think about how you will mark your horse before disaster strikes.

Temporary Identifications

- Halter tag—Attach a luggage tag or any other tag to the halter of the horse. Write your contact information on the tag and the horse's special needs, if any. Sometimes horses lose their halters, so it

is always a good idea to have the owner's information vested on several parts of the horse, just to be sure that at least one will endure past the disaster.

- Neck collars—These are sturdy plastic collars generally used in broodmare operations. You can write your information on these collars.
- Leg band—These are bands securely vested around the pastern of the horse.
- Tag—Put your information on a tag, and braid into the tail or mane.

- Clipper-shaved information in the animal's coat—Shave off your phone number on the horse's coat.
- Livestock-marking crayon (non-toxic, non-water-soluble)—Use it to write your information on the horse's coat.
- Permanent marker to mark hooves—These marks allow you to identify your horse more easily in a rescue facility by the color of its hooves. These markings give you the advantage of saying upfront, "My horse has blue (or whatever color) hooves."

Examples of freeze-marking used by the Bureau of Land Management to identify wild horses and burros gathered from public rangelands.



Example of freeze-branding as permanent identification.



Freeze-mark iron (photo courtesy of Stolen Horse International Inc.)



Example of lip tattoo (photo courtesy of Stolen Horse International Inc.)

Permanent Identifications

- Microchip—This is becoming a more common practice with horses as it is with dogs. This identification method is helpful only if a rescue team has a scanner. Generally, animal shelters have scanners.
- Tattoo, brand (hot or freeze-brand), freeze-marking—Some breed associations or registries already require tattoos, but it is possible for horse owners to tattoo or brand their horses as a means of identification. However, you should register the brand or tattoo with the Department of Agriculture, the Office of State Veterinarian, before you apply it to your animals.

Ownership Identification

Certain items should be kept with you and may be used as proof of ownership. Place all these items in a zipper-lock bag, and keep them in a safe place that you can get to after the disaster.

- Take a picture of your horse with a family member in the photo as well. You may want left and right lateral views and front and rear views. Be sure to show any scars or other identifying marks.
- Add a copy of the current Coggins test and any other information such as tattoos, microchip ID, special scars and any other permanent identification, copy of registration papers, and your local veterinarian's contact information. Do not leave a copy of the Coggins test with your horse, as it may be used to claim ownership of the horse.

Dealing with Inclement Weather

During inclement weather, there is always one question that horse owners have: Should we leave the horses in the barn or put them out at pasture? This decision is entirely up to you; however, you should use common sense. Things to consider are:

- Barn structure—How old is the barn? Is its structure solid? Even a solid structure may not withstand a strong wind, so you may want to consider putting your horses out at pasture before the inclement weather. You will need enough safe area and good fences to keep your horses safe and confined.
- Trees and power lines surrounding the barn—If there are trees or power lines near or over the barn that could fall on the barn and cause fire, you may want to put your horses out.
- Storms—If out at pasture during a thunderstorm or an electrical storm, you and/or your horse could be struck by lightning.
- Overcrowding—Horses may get very agitated during inclement weather, and you may not want to put many horses in small acreage. Dominance issues can add to the stress of the weather and may cause horses to go through fences and injure themselves or get loose on roads and cause accidents.
- Floods—Horses are better off outside where they can get to higher ground. Horses trapped in barns during floods will drown.

Planning and Preparation

- Feed—Have at least two weeks supply of feed/hay in a dry area. If you end up stranded on your property, for example in the case of floods, your horse will have enough to eat until the situation is back to normal. If you are stranded in your house, surrounded by water, your horse should have access to the hay, as it is not safe for people to wander around in flood waters.
- Water—Fill plastic trash cans with water, secure the lids, and store safely. You can have clean water for your horses in case a water line is broken, the water source becomes contaminated, or you have no electricity to run a pump.
- Emergency care kit (in a waterproof container)—Include medications, salves, ointments, vetwrap, bandages, tape, povidone-iodine, halter, lead rope, etc. With an emergency care kit or first-aid kit, you will be prepared to treat your horse for minor injuries until things normalize.
- Emergency barn kit—Include a chain saw and fuel, hammers and nails, saw, fencing materials, emergency fencing, etc. Also, keep an ample supply of flashlights and batteries on hand. Learn how to operate any power tools in advance so you can operate them safely. Think about what you would need to do to clean out areas, reach your horses in a damaged barn, or put fences back up. Enter damaged buildings only if you can do so safely. Remember your safety is paramount.
- Power source—Consider having a generator and fuel to run it. This is especially important if you own a boarding facility. Your customers will expect you to be prepared to continually care for their horses.

Other Considerations

Other aspects to consider for your plan:

- Review comprehensive insurance plans with disaster considerations in mind, especially if you keep other people's animals.
- Do not stay in the barn with your horses during a storm. Regardless of how much you love your horses or how expensive they may be, your life is more important than theirs.

Before Evacuating

Think about what your horses will need if you are forced to leave them behind unattended for a period of time.

- If you need to evacuate, make sure the hay supply you stockpiled is accessible for the horses to feed themselves. That way you are certain they will have enough to eat until you are able to return. **Remember to remove the baling twine before you leave.**
- Notify neighbors and family where you will be during an emergency so they will know how to reach you in case something happens to your horses. Also, they will not waste time looking for you, thinking that you may be missing.
- Turn **off** circuit breakers to the barn before leaving. A power surge could cause sparks and fire. The last thing you want is to come back home and learn that your barn was spared by the storm but was overtaken by fire, especially if the horses were kept in the barn.
- If it is winter, you may not want to turn off power to the barn, as the water pipes may burst and the barn may flood. Horses may need to be kept inside during an ice storm or blizzard.

After the Disaster

- Be very careful when venturing outside. Live electric wires could be all around you.
- Metal pieces will likely be everywhere, and you need to be careful so neither you nor your horses get injured.
- Carefully try to clean debris from the barn, and clear the driveway out to the road.
- In floods, snakes will seek high ground. Do not put your hands or feet in recesses you cannot see. Snakes will also hide between hay bales and banked shavings.
- Check fences to ensure that they are intact.
- Dispose of wet hay from pasture and barns as spoiled hay may be a source of botulism.

Conclusion

The saying “it is better to be safe than sorry” should be your motto when it comes to preparing for impending disaster. Be proactive and protect yourself and your horses before disaster happens.

Resources

- American Association of Equine Practitioners, Emergency and Disaster Preparedness: http://www.aep.org/emergency_prep.htm
- American Veterinary Medical Association, Disaster Preparedness and Response Guide: www.avma.org/disaster/responseguide/responseguide_toc.asp
- County Animal Response Team: www.tristatecart.com
- eXtension—HorseQuest: www.extension.org/horses
- Kentucky Department of Agriculture: www.kyagr.com
- Kentucky Division of Emergency Management: <http://kyem.ky.gov>
- Kentucky Office of State Veterinarian: www.kyagr.com/statevet
- Kentucky State Public Health Veterinarian: www.kentucky.gov
- Kentucky Veterinary Medical Association: www.kvma.org
- Stolen Horse International Inc.: www.netposse.com

Put your safety and the safety of your family first.

In Kentucky, for brand registration, contact the Office of State Veterinarian at 502-564-3956, or visit online at www.kyagr.com/statevet/bovine/brand.htm