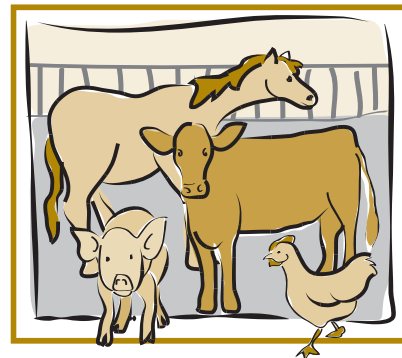


Wildfire Preparedness for Horse Owners

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Livestock Series | Management



by N. Striegel*

Along many high country Colorado roads you may see signs indicating the “Fire Danger Rating” level. The likelihood of a wildfire increases dramatically when the fire danger is moderate to high combined with a large number of dead trees in forested areas. Wildfires may be one of the most common types of hazards in Colorado. If you have horses and you live in a high-risk area for a wildfire, are you prepared to protect your horses? They need your help and planning.

First, you have to access your risk. Consider your location and your local situation. Knowing your risk will help you prepare your plan.

Having a plan and implementing that plan is the greatest factor in limiting your losses. With horses, we are not only speaking of a monetary loss but also the emotional loss of losing your horse which is impossible to calculate in dollars and cents. Your plan needs to be communicated to everyone who is living with you or to anyone who will be taking care of your place in your absence.

Key Elements of a Preparedness Plan

Evacuation Routes

When considering the potential hazard of wildfires, an evacuation plan of yourself and your horse(s) is a major part of being prepared. You cannot wait until you see smoke or fire to make the decision to evacuate and determine your evacuation route(s). And you cannot simply turn your horses loose and rely on their natural instinct to figure out for themselves where they can flee to safety. They need your help to survive a wildfire. However, in some situations where you cannot evacuate your horses according to plan and there is imminent danger to you and your horses, it is better to turn your horses

loose instead of leaving them confined to a barn or pasture.

To plan your evacuation route, contact your local emergency management officials, your county law enforcement officials, or your local animal control officers to find out what they recommend and what procedures they have in place for disasters. Make plans for more than one evacuation route in case the wildfire cuts off one of your exits. Prioritize the routes if you have the choice. Drive all the evacuation routes with your horse trailer. The exit routes must pass the questions of: Can I get out with my size of trailer?; Is it passable in all weather conditions?; and, What if there was flooding and a wildfire at the same time – how would the routes be affected? In some areas, you can have wildfires raging at the same time that flooding is occurring.

Be aware of dangerous fire conditions in your area and know how to find information on potential conditions or situations.

Have your trailer in good condition and available to hitch up and load at any time. Keep a full tank of gas in the vehicle that you will use for towing the horse trailer. If you do not trailer your horse often or if you do not own a trailer, work with your horses to get them trained to load easily. Make it a goal to be able to load them by only one handler so that in the case of an emergency they could be loaded quickly and easily. If you do not own a trailer, contact a neighbor who does and find out if he would be willing to help you evacuate your horse. It’s good practice to load your horse in the trailer you will be using to evacuate.

Team-up with a Neighbor

Develop a team plan with a neighbor. This may help in the joint use of resources such as a trailer and supplies. It also helps to outline a joint plan. Inform each other in the case of an evacuation. Working as a team, you will be better able to efficiently evacuate in a shorter amount of time.

Quick Facts

- The safety of you and your family should be the first priority.
- The greatest factor in limiting your losses during a wildfire is having and using a preparedness plan.
- An equine first aid kit is essential for all horse owners to have in the barn or trailer in case of emergencies.
- Prioritize a list of tack to take during an evacuation.
- If you get word that your area is being evacuated start the process immediately.

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Horse identification is accomplished by microchip, brands, pictures, unique markings, registration papers, brand papers, or by a combination of the above.

Horse Identification Packet

Being able to identify your horse is important in large-scale emergencies where horses could be housed at the fairgrounds or large boarding facilities. It is also essential in situations when you are not at home to evacuate and your horses are hauled to a collecting facility or maybe were simply turned loose. Identification papers enable you to claim your horse more quickly. It also prevents someone else from falsely claiming your horse. In most cases of a major disaster, documentation of ownership will be required to claim a lost horse.

In situations where your horse has been lost, the legal entity in most communities to work with is the animal control agency, and it is usually under the law enforcement division of that county. In Colorado, most livestock identification and ownership issues are under the jurisdiction of the Colorado Division of Brands, part of the Colorado Department of Agriculture.

It is important to note that in Colorado brand inspection is required for horses any time an animal is sold, transported over 75 miles, or leaves the state. Even if your horse does not have a brand, a brand inspection is required. A permanent travel card may be obtained from your local inspector that eliminates the need for future brand inspections for movement of your horse. In addition, “any time livestock is to be transported on a public road, proof of ownership of the stock being transported must be available for inspection by the Colorado State Patrol, local law enforcement, or a livestock inspector. If the animal carries your Colorado brand, this can be your proof of ownership. Failure to show proof of title is a misdemeanor.” (C.R.S.35-53-117, Colorado Dept. of Agriculture, Brand Inspection Board web site) You can see that having a permanent travel card or brand papers will aid in claiming your horse and in meeting brand laws concerning movement of horses.

Horse identification is accomplished by microchip, brands, pictures, unique markings, registration papers, brand papers, or by a combination of the above. Make a packet on each of your horses and have it readily available to grab and load with your horse in case of emergency. Also in that packet you can file your health certificates, brand paperwork, vaccination records, and other health information. If you put all of your paperwork in one small portable file container it can be quickly located and loaded in case of an emergency.

Equine First Aid Kit

An equine first aid kit is essential for all horse owners to have in the barn or trailer. A well-stocked first aid kit kept in the barn will always be available when the trailer is loaded with tack and supplies. A general first aid kit that is routinely updated can be used for emergencies like wounds, colic, foot injuries, or other trauma and then be available for an evacuation in case of some type of disaster.

Horse Medication

If possible, clearly label all horse medication and keep it in an appropriate container that can be quickly located and loaded in emergencies.

Tack

Prioritize a list of tack to take during an evacuation. With a list, you are more efficient and do not have to take time to plan or decide what to take. The most important tack to remember are ropes and halters (leather or rope halters are preferred because nylon halters can get too hot if the horse gets too close to a fire). Include a water bucket on your tack list. Prepare neck bands for your horses that have your contact information written on them. These neck bands would only be used in an emergency evacuation in which you only have time to turn your horses loose. Another option is to create an identity halter that has a metal or brass plate riveted to a leather halter. You can have metal dog tags made for this purpose. Briefcase identification tags also work well when filled out and kept in the tack room for quickly attaching to halters. Of course, these items should be prepared ahead of time.

Boarding Arrangements

It cannot be overstated about making arrangements for the boarding of your horses at an outside facility. In the case of a major disaster, the county fairgrounds may be the appointed shelter for livestock, horses, pets, and maybe even displaced people. You can also make plans with friends who have equine facilities that are located out of harms way. Or you could use a large commercial boarding facility. The important point is to have a place lined up to take your evacuated horse. Write down your arrangements and the list of your contact people, stick it on a clipboard and hang it in the barn.

Contact List

It is best to have an outside contact of someone who lives in a different area of the country to be the clearinghouse for calls from your family and friends. You can make contact with the clearinghouse by whatever means possible and then they can relay information to others. By appointing a contact who lives outside of your area, they are less likely to be affected by your area's possible failures of infrastructure and communications. Other family members from around the country can check in with them to get an update on your condition. Your contact can relay messages from you to them or vice versa.

In a disaster situation, you will be very busy with evacuation and may not be able to be reached due to failures of communication lines or cell towers. Place these contact numbers on another clipboard in the barn. You can also use this contact list clipboard for other important phone numbers such as your veterinarian or sheriff. Another place to post your contacts is in your cell phone address list, but it is best to have a written form available in the barn too. If first responders come to your place and you are not home the contact clipboard will provide valuable information to them.

Priority List

Once you have made your plan you need to prioritize it. This helps you during an actual emergency or helps others in the event that you are not home at the time. Even though it is hard to think about, priority is given to people over horses. So

on your priority list keep human safety as your guiding principle. Maybe you only have a two-horse trailer and you have 5 horses, a priority list must be made. Or maybe you have limited time because of a rapidly advancing fire, so priorities must be made on what you will have time to do. You can also keep this list on your contact list clipboard in the barn.

In the Event of an Actual Emergency

Safety

First and foremost, the safety of you and your family should be priority number one! That cannot be emphasized enough. If you get word that your area is being evacuated start the process immediately. Wildfires are very unpredictable and can spread rapidly. As soon as you get word of a forced evacuation, begin to implement your evacuation plan as sometimes the loading of horses and other necessary items will take longer than you expect. This is especially important if you have many horses to evacuate. Make contact with your neighbor if you are working as a team and get in touch with your outside contact to give them your updated status.

If the fire is close and you are unable to get your horses out, do not leave them confined. After getting them out of the barn or pasture, close the doors or gates, as horses in danger will often seek the comfort of the known – their pastures and stalls. Also keep in mind that your horse in the face of danger may not react to you the same as they usually do. Use caution as their instincts may take over and they may be in the flight or fight mode. If possible, have someone help you handle the horses.

If you have not had your horses permanently identified in some way such as microchips, brands, tattoos, or photographs then paint your cell phone

number or the last four digits of your social security number on the horse. Place your identity halter on your horse (if you've prepared it ahead of time). If you only have nylon halters, remove them because if your horses get too close to an actual fire nylon halters get hot and could cause further skin damage. If you have time, try to lead your horses away from the buildings before releasing them to encourage them to move away from the buildings and the impending fire.

Summary

Preparing a plan is the most important element in the preparation for the wildfire season.

Remember to:

1. Plan.
2. Practice the plan.
3. Place people's safety first – that includes your own!

References

- Colorado Community Animal Response Training: Distributed by Colorado State Animal Response Team, a program of the Colorado Veterinary Medical Foundation.
- American Association of Equine Practitioners; Horse Health Education: Disaster Preparedness
- Colorado Department of Agriculture Brand Inspection Board Web Page: When to get an Inspection. (2008). Retrieved June 19, 2008, from www.colorado.gov/cs/Satellite/Agriculture-Main/CDAG/1176829158611
- FEMA Emergency Management Institute's Course #IS-10, Animals in Disaster, Module A: Awareness and Preparedness. <http://training.fema.gov/EMIWeb/downloads/is10comp.pdf>

Emergency Evacuation Checklist

- horse(s)
- 3 day supply of hay, grain and, if possible, water for each horse
- paperwork (health certificates, vaccination records, brand paperwork)
- first aid kit
- horse medication(s), if applicable
- ropes
- leather halter(s)
- water bucket
- identity halter/tag
- boarding arrangement list
- contact list
- priority list