



PLANNING

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Forming a Facility Evacuation Plan

Imagine that your PATH Intl. Center has just received warning from a police officer pulling up to the barn. He tells you that the small wildfire that started last night over the hill in the next county has experienced a change in direction and winds have increased. He orders that all people and animals must be evacuated in the next three hours. He tells you that since firefighters have lost control of the wind-driven fire, you will not be able to return to this location until the evacuation order is dropped. That could be tomorrow or weeks from now, depending upon the fire activity.

This exact scenario has been played out numerous times in equine facilities from California, Texas, Oregon and Florida (USA), to Alberta, British Columbia and Saskatchewan (Canada). Record number of wildfires affected countries from the western U.S. to the United Kingdom and Greece during 2018 and now Australia during 2019/2020. Photos and videos of people leading their horses on foot, from vehicles or, in desperation, releasing them to “find their way to safety” on the roads have become common on social media.

Clearly, the welfare of our animals requires better forethought. First, we need to determine the types of crises and disasters that may necessitate an emergency action plan, or evacuation plan of your center. This article includes real-world tips on how managers and facilities/centers can form plans to ensure the safe removal of equines, staff, equipment and supplies from a property in imminent danger. Key points will include:

- an all-hazards response approach
- real hazards versus perceived dangers
- basic logistics for evacuating and sheltering equines
- communication/chain of command tips
- facility mitigation/preparation and coordination
- evaluation of the actual resources available
- examples of specific emergency responses
- conducting an evacuation plan training drill

It will not include barn fire evacuations, which, due to their complexity, will need to be covered in another article, as the understanding of prevention and mitigation strategies for barn fires has greatly evolved in the last 15 years.

MAKE YOUR PLAN

Animals are the legal responsibility of the owners, who are encouraged to have plans for disaster response, evacuation transport and sheltering of their animals in an all-hazards protection and response plan. Compiling a detailed emergency action plan increases the probability of a safe and effective response or evacuation during times of crisis. Additionally, it gives center managers and staff the chance to evaluate aspects of daily administration or procedures that might need to be improved or changed.

Note: Facilities should have a shelter-in-place plan for animals and humans for events of a short-term or short-notice nature, such as loss of electricity, blizzards/snow or high winds. Generally, shelter-in-place is considered dangerous in large disasters (hurricanes, flooding, wildfires) and should only be utilized when there is not time to evacuate people and animals to a safer place, such as in a tornado.

An all-hazards approach encourages planning for many different types of disasters that can be consolidated

To safeguard the welfare of our equine partners, it's important to develop emergency evacuation plans to ensure their safe removal from a center in imminent danger. Photo courtesy of Hearts & Horses, Inc.



into one broad plan that can be tweaked as needed. A great place to start is with FEMA's three online training courses for “Animals in Disasters,” “Animals in Disasters: Community Planning” and “Livestock in Disasters” at <https://training.fema.gov/is/courseoverview.aspx?code=IS-10.a> and sequentially at -11.a and -111.a.

After you have written a list of questions and resources relevant to your center planning, the next steps will be to:

- Make copies and set up a meeting with center staff to develop an evacuation plan.
- Make an appointment to speak to your jurisdiction's emergency manager.
- Find the impact hazard zone for your location by asking them where your facility lies on the flood and wildfire danger maps and what other localized hazards, such as hurricanes or tornados, could impact your center.
- Discuss your center evacuation plan and ask whether your plan fits in with their local emergency management plan for animals, especially equines.
- Find out if they have an “Animals in Disaster” plan and get a copy.
- Make an annual appointment with the manager to review and update your plans.

EVACUATION CHECKLIST



PREPAREDNESS LEVEL

- ✓ Truck and trailer maintenance completed before high fire danger conditions
- ✓ Truck hitched to trailer correctly
- ✓ Rigs fueled up and pointed down the driveway
- ✓ Control of keys plan in effect (looking for keys at the last minute has fouled many plans)
- ✓ Three days of feed, hay, medications, buckets and water for animals and people is loaded
- ✓ Portable fencing or highline emergency kits loaded
- ✓ Personnel go-bags packed and ready to load
- ✓ Valuables and animal paperwork packed into transport containers
- ✓ All animals trained to load reliably into transports (trailers, cages, etc.)
- ✓ All vaccinations, Coggins, health certificates and medications on hand and updated
- ✓ Individual animals have identification, especially if planning housing at a public shelter
- ✓ Load plans completed for all animals, people and equipment
- ✓ Everyone knows the plan and has copies of maps and functional communication methods
- ✓ Communication messages created for informing everyone of status
- ✓ Go-to location/shelter coordinated ahead of time
- ✓ Regular updates on the fire—radio, various media and apps

RESPONSE LEVEL

- ✓ Make a decision to evacuate before the general public is ordered to evacuate
- ✓ Send out communication messages so that everyone is informed of status
- ✓ Load animals into transports (trailers, cages, etc.)
- ✓ Load valuables and paperwork transport containers
- ✓ Load personnel go-bags
- ✓ Double-check communication methods, maps and the plan with everyone
- ✓ Drive to go-to location/shelter—unload animals and set up for sheltering
- ✓ Keep checking updates on various media/apps/radio

To see if your center is prepared, take a stark look around and ask yourself some “what if” questions: What if you cannot get local assistance by calling 911? Widespread disasters (wildfires, tornados, flooding and blizzards) require huge numbers of local responders deploying to help humans. Thus, they might not be available to assist equines until later in the disaster’s course, in some cases days to weeks later. What if your staff and volunteers have evacuated the area with their families and their own animals and are not available to assist?



BEST PRACTICE:

Annually review your disaster response and evacuation plans of facility mitigation and preparedness for all-hazards disasters and update your plans.

KNOW THE REAL DANGERS

It is important to understand the actual dangers that happen in these types of disasters and build plans based on the real hazards presented by past disasters and lessons learned by others. For example, flames don’t force evacuations in wildfires—it is toxin-filled smoke and poor air quality that impact owners and horses many miles and hours before flames arrive. Horses have large lungs that can’t filter the acrid tiny particles within smoke; thus, they develop serious health issues when exposed.

Similarly, while hurricane winds can cause serious wind-driven injuries to exposed animals, it is the facilities, which, when inappropriately built to minimal agricultural codes, often collapse onto trapped groups of animals. At the same time, it is the flooding after the hurricane is long gone that is responsible for much more equine suffering and deaths than the initial wind event, making it difficult to provide fodder, feed and clean water to animals for days to weeks.

Since it is impossible to render any facility disaster-proof, management must enforce mitigation/prevention techniques regularly, remain informed about possible weather effects and train center staff in local hazard response plans and methods. Centers with resilient and realistic plans will reduce the negative effects of disaster on people and equines by enacting an effective response locally.

TRAILERING AND NEEDED EQUIPMENT AND SUPPLIES

Develop a plan that takes all the issues involved in trailering, loading and truck operation into consideration. Ask yourself which horses go onto which trailer? Which

ones are a priority to go first? Who is too big, too small or too fractious next to another horse? Who doesn't like to load in a particular trailer or needs a buddy? Now determine how many trucks you would need, how many drivers and how many multiple round trips to an evacuation shelter or alternative facility your drivers will have to make.

Consider all the truck and trailer logistics involved. Are there certain trailers that can only be hauled by certain trucks? Do you have to switch ball sizes on the hitch to be able to tow it? Are there keyed locks to be opened before being able to haul the trailer, and if so where are the keys? Are the electrical connections keyed to certain trucks or universal? Then write down this information, drawing diagrams to make it easier to see, and share it with staff and any volunteers who might be involved in emergency hauling.

Faced with moving your entire operation to an alternate facility, think about what would be needed to maintain everyone's sanity, as well as the health and safety of equines and humans. Small things people tend to take for granted, such as water, toilets and electricity, might not be available if your center had to be moved to a public shelter or alternative facility.

Make lists of items needed in the advent of a partial evacuation (gas leak, minor flooding, earthquake or snow loading effects on barn, etc.) and in the event the entire facility was predicted to burn to the ground in a wildfire or stripped bare by a hurricane. What would you need if you had a breakdown or wreck while evacuating? Where will you take the animals? Pre-coordinated private facilities are always a better recourse than public shelters (where animals may not have vaccination histories) or what is available on social media.



BEST PRACTICE:

Troubleshoot all the issues involved in trailering and develop a list with staff and volunteers of supplies that might be needed during an emergency so there are fewer surprises or forgotten supplies.

STAFF COMMUNICATION AND CHAIN OF COMMAND

These are the greatest limitations in most response scenarios—good communication and competent leadership. Both are hard to maintain, especially under duress. For instance, if the center leader doesn't use a chain of command under normal circumstances, no one may know how to follow or who is in charge under duress. Neither good communication nor a chain of command can be very effective if it isn't practiced on a daily basis.

Find out where your facility lies on the flood and wildfire danger maps and what other localized hazards, such as hurricanes or tornados, could impact your center. Photo courtesy of Fieldstone Farm Therapeutic Riding Center



EMERGENCY PREPARATION KIT



- ✓ Tire blowout response tools (tire iron, minimum two 4x4" 2' long lumber chocks, drive-up ramp, lubricant/rust buster, spare tire filled, can of air)
- ✓ Electric tape, portable electric fence charger and enough step-in posts to build small stalls/paddocks for all equines OR enough highline anchor and rope materials to provide tie-ups for all horses for a short period
- ✓ Emergency supplies—blankets, tarps, large trash bags, extra lead ropes, gloves, leg wraps, disinfectants, cleaners and towels
- ✓ Emergency first-aid kit for humans and horses—speak to your doctor and a veterinarian to ensure yours are tailored to your needs, not just an online list of random materials.
- ✓ Emergency tool kit—hand and power tools for repairing fencing, digging holes, cutting down trees or fixing whatever is broken. A minimum list would include knives, wire cutters, shovel, pliers, hammer, nails, handsaw, chainsaw, fence tool, wire, pry bar, hay string and duct tape.

Does your center have up-to-date phone and social media contacts for each of your volunteers, staff and participants and their family members and/or caregivers? Can you send out one message that would go to everyone involved with the center with correct information on how to help, where to go, who to contact, etc.? Do employees and volunteers know who their regular report is and how to communicate with the center director effectively?



BEST PRACTICE:

Involve everyone at your center in understanding how command and communication work in disasters. Encourage staff to take the one-hour online course: Incident Command System (ICS) 100 at <https://training.fema.gov/is/courseoverview.aspx?code=is-100.c>.

EVALUATION OF RESOURCES

Make a list of resources needed for each type of disaster or crisis you can expect. Think through details—what equipment, supplies, tasks and people would be necessary to implement your planned response to each type. Remember, once an evacuation is ordered, some people may not be able to reach the location to assist, so have back-up plans (nearby neighbors, for instance). Below are examples of some specific emergencies and the kinds

of questions and needs your center should address to be prepared.

EXAMPLE: SNOW OVERLOADING ONTO CENTER ROOF

Most buildings are made to carry only 20 pounds of load per square foot—intended only for short periods. Older buildings, or those not designed for that level of loading, can collapse catastrophically. Numerous arenas, barns and roofs of various equine facilities have collapsed in the last five years, often after only minutes of audible warning as the building groans with the strain. Ask yourself: What is the signal to evacuate and who gives that signal? Where will the center safely place people and animals who have been evacuated out of the building? Does your center have the equipment/expertise to remove the snow, for instance roof rakes, ladders, rope and safety harnesses, snow shovels and trained people, or does it have a plan where to find this? Will heavy equipment (crane, etc.) be necessary, and how would your center find this equipment and operators?

EXAMPLE: LOSS OF POWER TO CENTER

Power loss can occur due to weather conditions, a driver hitting a pole, lightning or a power grid loss. Depending on various factors and length of outage, lack of electricity could be a mere inconvenience or a serious

DO'S AND DON'TS

DO'S: RESOURCES FOR BEST PRACTICES

- The American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP) has developed a list of resources at <https://thehorse.com/137996/equine-emergency-evacuation-kit-checklist/>.
- The Horse and the University of California, Davis, Center for Equine Health have partnered to help protect your facility and its people and horses from natural disasters with this interactive article: "Are you and your horse ready?" at <https://thehorse.com/features/natural-disaster-are-you-and-your-horse-ready/>

DON'TS: EXAMPLES OF POOR PLANNING OR RESPONSES

- (1) Although this video went viral, riding a horse through floodwaters to rescue a trapped stallion is fraught with lack of planning and potential for tragedy. <https://www.foxnews.com/us/cowboys-rescue-hundreds-of-drowning-horses-and-cattle-from-harvey-floods>
- (2) The young woman in this article had a last-minute plan that happened to work; however, you can imagine the legal implications if it had not. <https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/fort-mcmurray-teen-finally-reunited-with-horse-she-rode-to-escape-raging-wildfire>
- (3) The inability of people to understand the dangers faced by horses trying to negotiate disaster conditions is well demonstrated in the following video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4EUGxDzM9Ic>

impact on continuity of business resumption. In this event, you will need alternative power sources (battery, solar or a generator), lighting, a method of heating water (winter conditions) and ventilation (summer conditions). Find out what is available and compare the costs. Are there batteries to run small lights and appliances? Does the power company understand your center's priority for resumption of service?

EXAMPLE: WILDFIRE APPROACHING THE CENTER

The flame front rarely kills anyone—it is the smoke and particulates in the lungs of animals and people that forces early evacuation to avoid injury. Shelter-in-place is rarely possible for wildfires without lung protection; thus, full evacuation is warranted. Often evacuation areas are subject to restrictions on access—once evacuated, no one is allowed back into the area. What are your escape routes if the fire cuts off the main road? Does the center have enough trailers and drivers? Where will you go to evacuate?



BEST PRACTICE:

Make sure your disaster response and evacuation plans include all the details and “what if” scenarios incorporating the needed equipment, supplies, tasks and people for each type of emergency.

PRACTICING THE PLAN

By practicing your center's evacuation plan, you will uncover weaknesses to address. In addition, coordinating with local fire response officials for input will make them aware of your center's priority for services. As professionals, they can point out individual problems to consider fixing before an actual disaster occurs. Centers should encourage drills and review evacuation plans at least quarterly to ensure new and long-time volunteers, staff and participants alike are well prepared. Post evacuation plans where everyone can see them, including visitors.

The planning process is as important as (or more important than) the plan itself and should involve all potentially affected people—families/caregivers, volunteers, staff, participants, veterinarian, farrier, boarders, etc., to ensure everyone's commitment to the effort. Think through the worst-case scenario. If your center had to evacuate during a rain storm in the dark, for instance, how would you change the evacuation plan (improved lighting, more batteries, always backing the rigs in so they can be driven straight out) to make it work better?

All personnel commonly around center facilities should be familiar with the evacuation plan and the location of response equipment such as keys, hand tools, medical first-aid kits, hoses/water sources and fire extinguishers. (Adding these items to your familiarization checklist for new volunteers may assist with response.)

Practice and preparation make everyone at a center more self-reliant, efficient and confident if a true disaster occurs. Schedule a day to practice for success, and warn everyone there will be a full practice for a particular scenario (choose a different scenario each time). Make the simulated 911 call. Make real calls to your call-down list to activate resources and people to respond and assist. Hitch your trailers, load your horses, take them to a real evacuation location off-site, unload them and set up a real shelter situation.



BEST PRACTICE:

Do a full rehearsal drill of the plan and time it. Have a scribe whose only responsibility is to take notes, update the timeline of what happened when and where problems arose. Ask another person to act as a photographer. After the drill, these will help center management determine what went well and where/how to improve the plan.

Compiling and practicing a detailed emergency action plan for evacuation may seem very time-consuming and involve a great deal of effort during normal operations. However, when a crisis does occur, this level of organization can dramatically decrease lost time, avert injuries, prevent tragedies and allow your center to deliver an effective evacuation plan for response during a catastrophe. After all, as Benjamin Franklin famously advised fire-threatened Philadelphians in 1736, “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”

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