

The First 72 Hours: A National Standard for Self-Preparedness

By Vicki Schmidt

Probably the most important message emergency response instructors teach their first responder students is: do not expect the general public to be anywhere near prepared for an emergency. Sadly, as we've seen in many instances with hurricanes Katrina and Rita, livestock owners are as comfortable in their denial that catastrophic events could happen to them, as is the average citizen.

One sign of a prosperous nation is that it is devoid of threats. This ideology, commonly given to life in the United States, has led most of us to pretend and believe that our government, or just the blessing of life in America, can keep us from the turmoil and devastation common to less affluent countries. In addition, low probability statistics, and years of "nothing dramatic happening", lull us into a sense of false security. I am a firm believer that the home in homeland and hometown security begins at the grassroots level, and that home begins with us.

If any good can come from the devastating knowledge that horses in some stables in Louisiana were buried alive in 12 feet of mud and water, it's that stable owners in other parts of the country might wake up and prepare for the worst. Another lesson we livestock owners need to accept, is that no amount of money or technology can completely protect us from the wrath of Mother Nature. The only thing that has any chance of lessening death or damage to you, your farm, and your livestock is pre-planning for an emergency. We are fairly lucky in Maine that most of us do not live in severely hazard prone areas, but that does not mean that dramatic and serious events could not happen here.

Pre-planning for an emergency at your livestock facility can get quite involved, but do not let the task overwhelm you. There are basically two types of emergency response actions that owners need to consider. The first one involves a concept termed "sheltering in place", the second involves evacuation. Due to the fact that results of most risk analysis for Maine farms would involve sheltering in place, that is the concept we'll consider here. Sheltering in place is usually a very viable option for livestock owners when faced with an unanticipated or weather-related emergency. The decision to shelter in place could result from various factors. One involves the fact that evacuation is not feasible, possibly due to impassable roads, or that evacuation facilities are not able to accommodate your livestock. Stallion owners in the wake of Katrina and Rita learned a hard lesson when many evacuation facilities were not designed for stallions and could not accept them.

For sheltering in place, one of the first steps is to ask yourself this question: If our farm was cut off from the rest of the world for 72 hours, what do we need to survive? Two imperative activities to include with this question are assuming an attitude of worst case scenario, and to be sure to write things down. Documenting your needs will help you design, update, communicate, and if need be, more easily follow, your action plan.

I myself worry about watering 20 plus draft horses for 72 hours without the benefit of electricity, further complicated with a late season blizzard, sub-freezing temperatures, 70 mph winds on a barn roof designed for 60 mph, and two mares ready to foal at any moment. People tell me when I talk of scenarios like this, that I'm paranoid. And I probably am to some extent. But after working a number of years for a large animal veterinarian, and decades as an emergency responder, there isn't much that I haven't seen or heard about. I also know that farm owners who have gone through the process of preplanning have successfully executed an organized response during an emergency.

After you've imagined your worst case scenario, think about what it would take to get through it. If you have a generator, calculate how you're going to heat your house, pump water for your livestock, and run other critical needs. Can you ration what electricity you might need and keep enough fuel on hand to run an emergency generator for 72 hours? If not, can you arrange to safely store that much fuel, or can you guarantee the store down the road will have additional fuel for you? Remember, the general public and emergency services will want extra fuel too, and replenishing deliveries to the corner store might be days, or weeks away.

Though I know a few horses that would disagree, most livestock will survive just fine without grain. The average horse can survive for days without forage, but will die within just a few days without drinkable water. For most responsible livestock owners, 72 hours of hay or forage is not a problem. It's water that will be the limiting factor during most long term emergencies, due to the fact most of us depend on electricity or generators to ensure our water supply and to power our critical needs.

Other items to consider for your livestock are necessary medications, especially for aged or very young livestock. Medications designed to assist livestock through traumatic events should also be included. Talk to your veterinarian for advice on this issue and plan accordingly if mild tranquilizers or sedatives are recommended. Other considerations include your bedding supply. Would it be limited during an extended event? If livestock had to live outside due to a partial or complete building collapse could you quickly improvise alternative on-site shelter for them or provide blankets in the case of extremely cold weather?

One positive result that has rippled through the US over the last few years is a growing awareness of the need to self-prepare. Emergency responders view this as a silver lining to our nation's recent catastrophic events. In Maine, local and county emergency response teams are more organized and many have groups focused on both large and small animal preparedness. As livestock and farm owners, we need align with local emergency responders, self-prepare to the greatest extent feasible, and follow established protocols in the event of a wide spread emergency.

For additional information on livestock emergency management contact your local or county emergency planning organizations. Many of the local, county, and state agencies have guidelines and information available via the internet. If you do not have access to a computer, contact your local town officials for the name of your town's emergency management director (every town in the State of Maine has a person assigned with this duty). And remember, homeland and hometown security really does begin at home.

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