

Disaster Preparation for Livestock Operations

Due to the vulnerability of Alabama to hurricanes and their potential to cause widespread damage due to high winds and flooding, disaster preparedness is essential for livestock operations. Advanced planning can help producers minimize the loss of animal lives and the health problems associated with disasters. Although help may be available from many sources following a disaster, producers themselves are ultimately responsible for the welfare of their animals and should prepare accordingly.

Hopefully Alabama will not have to deal with a hurricane anytime soon, but it is certainly better to be prepared than to be caught off guard. Preparing for a natural disaster like a hurricane will help deal with any disaster, natural or intentional. While south Alabama is more likely to be directly impacted by a hurricane, producers in north Alabama may find themselves providing refuge for evacuated livestock. Other disasters could also affect north Alabama and the roles may be reversed.

In preparation for a potential disaster, every livestock producer should evaluate their herd health program. An appropriate herd health program not only maximizes animal health and profitability, but it also prepares livestock for a potential disaster. If a disaster occurs in the region, several situations could arise in which animals from different herds commingle and herd biosecurity is breached. Adequate herd immunity is critical to protecting livestock from infectious diseases, and the key to good herd immunity is a herd health program that focuses on nutrition and proper vaccination. Contact your local veterinarian and Regional Extension Agent for help developing or assessing your herd health program.

Animal identification is also critical. Many animals look alike, and after commingling with different herds it may be difficult to separate them properly without unique, permanent identification. Three common types of permanent identification include tattoos, hot brands, and freeze brands. Be sure to identify the farm or ranch along with the individual animal number. Pictures and videos may also help identify animals. Electronic identification tags and metal USDA tags are also unique to each animal. If only using numbered dangle tags, be sure to include farm and ranch information on the tag. Keep all herd records, registration papers, and health papers in a safe, dry location. Such documents will help recover animals after a disaster.

If evacuating animals in advance of a hurricane, contact your local veterinarian for health papers, especially if traveling across state lines. Sometimes states will waive requirements for health papers in emergencies. However, some testing requirements may be necessary before livestock re-enter Alabama. In some situations it may not be possible to evacuate or rescue all animals, so producers should prioritize animals so their most valuable stock gets attention first. Once an area is declared a mandatory evacuation zone, no livestock trailers are allowed on the highway. If animals are not evacuated, they probably have a better chance of survival when left in large open pastures rather than in a barn.

The Alabama Department of Agriculture recently opened four livestock shelters throughout Alabama. More information about these shelters can be found at the following website:

<http://agi.alabama.gov/u/news/2017/09/05/four-livestock-shelters-open-in-alabama-in-preparation-for-hurricane-irma>

The first priority for animal care following a disaster is providing feed and fresh water. Cattle can survive for several days without feed, and even weeks to months with limited feed, but water is a more critical need for livestock. Cattle can survive a few days without consuming water because of the moderate amount of water in their rumen, but this water quickly runs out and needs to be replaced. Therefore, livestock need to have access to fresh, clean water on a daily basis. Adult cattle consume between 15-25 gallons of water per day, and an animal's water requirements may increase by 50 percent during hot weather and in lactating animals. Portable swimming pools, without chlorinated pool water, may work well for emergency water supplies. Do not store water in containers previously used for chemicals, as toxicity could result. If wells depend on electricity to pump water, hand pumps or generators should be available.

Livestock that have been standing in water for prolonged periods of time may have skin infections and may be susceptible to tetanus. Dehydration and digestive upsets may occur if animals have been drinking water with high salinity. Mastitis might be a problem in dairy cattle, especially if the milking routine is disrupted. Damage to chemical storage buildings and fences may allow cattle access to toxic chemicals or plants. Severely injured or sick animals may require veterinary treatment or euthanasia. If animals do need treatment, working facilities should be inspected before use as they may have been damaged. Access to portable working facilities should be arranged in advance. Ropes, halters and wire cutters should also be collected in advance and stored in a safe place. With the help of a veterinarian, an emergency supply of medications and supplies can be prepared in advance.

While there is no way to prepare for every situation that may arise in a disaster, Alabama livestock producers can work with agricultural organizations, Regional Extension Agents, and other local livestock producers to lessen the impact of a disaster in their area and on their farm. The following checklist is certainly not all-inclusive, and should be modified to fit an individual farm.

Disaster Readiness Checklist:

Farm Environment

- Do preventive trimming of trees around barns, driveway and fences.
- Try to maintain as much free board as possible in manure lagoons to avoid potential overflow.
- Have materials on-hand to mend fence or to build a temporary fence.
- Stack together or anchor calf hutches that are not in use.
- Nail down all loose pieces of tin on barns.
- Attach extra guide wires to augers on grain bins.
- Have some extra tarps or shade cloth available in order to cover equipment if a roof is blown off or to provide temporary shade.
- Remove shade cloth from portable shade structures to prevent damage.

Equipment

- Fill all tractors, vehicles, generators and storage containers with fuel.
- Service generator and make sure they are operational.
- Run the generator under a load for a couple of hours at least every two months.
- Set up generators in place before a storm.
- If using a PTO-type generator, make sure the tractor being used has no fuel or oil leaks to prevent fire hazard.
- Charged batteries or solar power for electric fence.
- Extra fuel for generators, tractors, trucks, etc.
- Extra chainsaw blades, sharpeners, gas, oil.

Feed and Water

- Have about a two-week supply of all feedstuffs needed.
- Have an emergency supply of water.
- Move round bales from low-lying areas to an area that is readily accessible.

Animals

- Evaluate the herd health program.
- Identify animals.
- Have health papers if needed.
- Store records in a safe location.
- Have an evacuation plan if needed. Identify someone who is reliable and can provide a destination site for your livestock in case of a disaster. A written agreement is encouraged to make certain everyone understands the agreement. Maintain frequent contact with the person that is caring for your livestock.
- Move all animals to high ground if possible.
- Remove calves from calf hutches made of plastic or fiberglass if possible. If not, anchor the hutches.
- Have a supply of emergency veterinary supplies.

Miscellaneous

- Have cash on hand (credit cards will not work if power/phone lines are down).
- Evaluate livestock insurance alternatives and have an understanding of what your current policy covers.
- Coordinate plans with local agricultural groups.
- Dairies should try to work with their milk haulers and marketing co-ops to have the least amount of milk as possible in the bulk tank during a potential hurricane.
- Partner with other farms in remote areas for help.
- Have food and water for your family for 1-2 weeks
- Have first aid supplies for your family
- Have a list of emergency contact numbers

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