

# PROTECTING FARMS AND RANCHES FROM WILDFIRES

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From 1994 to 2004 federal agencies spent a total of \$9,127,325,600 on aid after wildfires. In 2004 alone, a total of 6,790,692 acres were burned in wildfires in the United States, and Federal agencies spent \$890,223,000 on recovery assistance. Wildfires also affect America's farms and ranches, damaging and destroying homes, barns, agriculture production facilities, crops and livestock. Much of this damage can be avoided, or at least minimized, if a few precautions are taken to minimize the risk and spread of wildfires.

## BEFORE

Precautions should be taken long before a fire threatens your property in order to minimize costly damages after a fire. All farm and ranch family members and farm workers should be able to identify potential fire hazards and understand the basic fire response techniques to eliminate or minimize personal and property damage.

### Basic measures include:

- ✓ Install and maintain smoke detectors. Smoke detectors should be installed in barns and buildings and checked at least once per month. Batteries should be changed at least once per year.
- ✓ Develop an escape or evacuation plan, and practice it. The evacuation plan should also include how to transport animals and livestock that may be in danger.
- ✓ Post emergency numbers in a central location, including the fire department, police department, local emergency response coordinator, and others who provide rural emergency assistance.
- ✓ Place fire extinguishers in all barns, vehicles, and tractors. Check extinguishers periodically for charge. Discard damaged or used fire extinguishers.
- ✓ Store fuels, pesticides, medicines and other chemicals in a fire-retardant enclosure or secure location away from heat sources and combustible materials. In the event of a wildfire, these substances should be removed from the premises.
- ✓ Keep barns and buildings clean of trash and other combustible materials such as hay, lumber, logs, and empty feed sacks.
- ✓ Practice farm-specific fire safety.
  - Always avoid fire hazards in the initial construction.
  - Make sure your farm has adequate water supply, such as an irrigation ditch, a water tank, a cistern, or a pond.
  - Keep irrigation sources clear of combustible material.
  - Keep areas clear of grass, weeds, and other debris.

- Park tractors and implements away from combustible materials such as hay stacks and fuel storage containers.

- ✓ Obtain fire insurance for livestock, buildings, and equipment.
- ✓ Conduct random, but regular inspections and fire drills. Invite the fire department for these drills to minimize confusion during an actual occurrence.
- ✓ Keep aboveground fuel storage tanks at least 40 feet from buildings.

## DURING

If a wildfire threatens your farm or ranch, always remember that human life must be the first priority; property comes second. Keep in mind, however, that when firefighters arrive, they may ask which to save first, second, third, etc, so determine beforehand the order of importance: livestock, machinery, or feed.

If you become trapped in a burning barn or building, practice basic fire safety.

- Get out quickly, but safely.
- Stay low, since smoke rises, and cover your mouth with a clean cloth to avoid inhaling smoke and gasses.
- Close doors after escaping rooms to slow the spread of fire.
- If smoke is pouring in the room at the bottom of the door, and the door feels hot, keep it closed.
- Open a window to escape or for fresh air while waiting to be rescued.
- If no smoke is coming in under the door and it is not hot, open it slowly to escape.

If you do have time to evacuate animals, proceed with caution. Some animals may refuse to leave, and some may even run back into a burning barn or building. Make sure to close gates prohibiting access to dangerous areas. When evacuating animals, do not lead them where they will become trapped or to a dead end.

## AFTER

The aftermath of a wildfire can be hazardous. A few precautions must be taken after a wildfire takes place on your property.

- ✓ Stay out of damaged barns buildings and return to your property only when authorities permit you to.
- ✓ Notify proper authorities if you believe that hazardous materials were released in the fire or during fire fighting. Place warning signs on contaminated areas.
- ✓ When disposing of some materials, such as those potentially contaminated with chemicals, check on state and local requirements for disposal procedures.
- ✓ Consult someone from the Local Emergency Planning Committee or the state Division of Emergency Management for legal clean-up procedures if needed.
- ✓ Keep livestock away from contaminated feed and water.
- ✓ Wear protective gear when entering contaminated areas including steel-toed boots, a hard hat, respiratory protection, gloves and other protective clothing when in damaged barns and buildings.
- ✓ Before entering a barn or building, asses the true integrity of the structure. Always turn off the electrical power and other utilities until a thorough safety inspection is made.
- ✓ If the decision is made to demolish a building, hire a professional. Professionals will be able to do the job more efficiently and safely.
- ✓ Check with your insurance provider so you know what is covered by wildfires. Take pictures of all damage, and inventory all damaged structures, supplies, equipment and machinery.

Save receipts for expenses relating to fire loss.

## **ANIMALS**

Animals are especially susceptible to wildfires, especially those that are confined to small pastures. After a wildfire, examine all animals exposed to wildfire smoke, heat, or burns. You may need to spray animals with water in order to cool them down.

## **OTHER RESOURCES**

*The Disaster Handbook.*

<http://disaster.ifas.ufl.edu/>.

Wildland Fire Statistics.

<http://www.mifc.gov/stats/wildlandfirestats.html>.

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