



Hurricane Preparedness

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In recent years, the state of Florida has had very quiet hurricane seasons with many storms passing us by. This has left Florida residents and horse owners with a false sense of security, and a certain degree of apathy about the potential for a hurricane to make landfall. We take for granted how devastating these storms can actually be. The key to surviving a natural disaster is to be prepared, especially if you own horses, pets and livestock. Advanced planning before a hurricane bears down on the state will increase the probability that the casualties are kept to a minimum. Are you ready?

While we can never really predict a sudden catastrophic event, we generally have an idea when a hurricane is looming in our direction a number of days in advance. Having a plan in place before the storm makes landfall will make getting through the event easier than if it is all done at the last minute. There should be two phases (at least) to your plan: The first phase involves being prepared for the impending storm, and will take time and a certain amount of research. The second phase occurs after the storm has passed when the work begins to “pick up the pieces”, assess the horses, the property, and survive until the area returns to normal.

As you feed your horses to-day, look at your barn and pastures. Are they safe? Are the doorways and barn aisle free of clutter? Is there more than one exit from the barn? Is the fencing, in good shape? Do you have a fire extinguisher? Mundane questions yes, but valid points to cover when a potential disaster is looming. Loose boards or roofing, garbage, and barn equipment can become flying projectiles in the high winds during a hurricane. Cobwebs and dust can add fuel to a fire. Junk in the doorway or barn aisle can slow down an escape effort, or can cause a horse to become trapped. Take the time now to assess your property and make repairs, before it is too late. As always, a barn and pastures that are kept in good shape all year round reduces the risk and severity of accidents.

Consider the halters and lead ropes, are they in good condition? Does each horse have a halter and a lead rope? Leather halters are the best; alternatively, use a nylon halter with a leather ‘break away strap’, this will break should the horse become entangled. Planning an escape route, and practicing it, saves minutes (and lives) in the event of a fire or flood.

A most important item to consider whether you stay or leave the area is the provision of food, water and first aid. Having hay, grain and water for at least 72 hours is recommended. (Longer if possible) A good idea is to fill several garbage cans (with a lid) with water in the 24 hours prior to an impending event. Be sure that your hay and grain is stored in a dry area.

Do you have an evacuation plan? Know where to go in the event that you are required to leave your property. Obey mandatory evacuation orders. There are a number of places that have been identified where you could evacuate with the horses. But don’t just show up; call well in advance so that stabling is made available to you. <http://evac.flahorse.com/relocation.html> is a good resource to search for names of evacuation facilities in. Many hotels do not regularly permit pets, however because of recent experiences, some of the hotels and evacuation shelters are now pet “friendly”. This does not necessarily mean that you and your pet can stay together, but they may be able to stay in a dedicated room with other pets. Should you decide to leave the state, be sure to have a health certificate for the horses. The state may waive the need to have a health certificate to leave the state during a hurricane, but you will need one to re-enter Florida. With evacuation in mind, does your horse load well? Consider the horses that you will need to move; for example, it is probably not a good idea to move a mare and foal with a stallion if they have never been in the trailer together. Or to attempt to load the two-year old that has never been on a trailer.

Service your truck and trailer; be sure that you have spare tires and plenty of gas. If you do not know how to change a tire, find out now so that you are not stranded. If you have additional gas tanks, have them filled. If you do not own a trailer investigate who in your area will be able to provide transportation for your horse(s) and make arrangements early in the season. An important point to remember is that no high profile vehicles (including horse trailers) will be permitted on the evacuation routes once winds reach 40 mph, and in some instances within the 24 hours prior to the storm making landfall.

Of utmost importance is that your horses' Coggins tests and vaccinations are current. While some facilities may not ask about vaccination status, all will require a current Coggins. (Keep the original, and keep a copy with your horse). The other very important thing to remember, even if you don't have the other vaccines current; be sure your horse is vaccinated for tetanus. Any other pertinent documents such as ownership papers, insurance papers and photographs should all be with you in a dry and secure container (not with your horse).

If you stay, and decide to turn your horses out in a field during a hurricane, check the fence lines, make sure that there is no junk in the pasture or near it, look out for buried and overhead electrical wires; electrocution is a hazard that is often overlooked! Also be cognizant of your neighbors; debris from other properties can travel a long way in high winds! Make sure that there is some form of identifying marking on your horse if it is to be let loose. Fences often come down (or may be taken down by officials) leaving the horse to fend for itself.

Identification during this chaotic time is crucial. Many owners will use temporary forms of identification, (including telephone numbers/address etc.) painted onto the horse, or luggage tags on the halter or braided into the mane. A more permanent way to identify your horse(s) is to microchip. This method is an almost failsafe way of identifying your horse should it become misplaced. Keep the supporting papers with you at all times. This will also place your horse on a national identification network that will aid in returning your horse to you.

Prepare a first aid kit that will include bandage materials, antiseptic scrub and solution, antibiotic ointment both for skin and for eyes, wound flush, and eye wash. This should be kept in a clean and waterproof container. Many of the injuries sustained after a hurricane or tornado are lacerations from flying debris and will need to be cleaned and covered. It would be best to discuss the contents of a first aid kit with your veterinarian. If your horse is on medication, be sure that you have enough to last through the hurricane and for several days afterwards. Your veterinarian can also educate you on some basic first aid techniques, and how to recognize the severity of a wound.

Another overlooked detail is what you would want to happen to your horse should it become injured and you are separated from it, or worse yet, killed during the storm. A written document that outlines these wishes can be included with copied documents that you leave with the horse. A copy can be given to your regular veterinarian; chances are he/she will be around to help out once the danger has subsided. Having your horse insured is a great investment, and can help to cover some of the medical costs should the horse require hospitalization.

Remember that after the storm, the emergency response teams will be occupied with immediate concerns of ensuring that the area is safe and that there are adequate supplies and utilities. It may be days before your animals will be evaluated or for you to return to your home with the horses. You will therefore need to have sufficient supplies to maintain them. Veterinary and animal rescue teams are mobilized when there is a catastrophic event, and they will be located at a central site where animals can be treated and housed.

Involving your neighborhood in a plan will optimize resources so that you can help each other during an emergency. If you belong to a horse group, organizing a disaster preparedness event with local officials and veterinarians will provide important information. That will also identify people that may need transportation and other assistance. Make a list of important telephone numbers and distribute it to neighbors and relatives. Provide one or more neighbors with keys to your property in the event that you are unable to get home. Be sure that all of your cell phones are charged.

Contact Brandon Equine Medical Center at 813-643-7177 or email info@brandonequine.com with any questions regarding this topic.