Disasters Happen

Have a detailed plan in place before you need it.

Story & photos by
BECKY MILLS

When Michael Bishop came to 7L Farms in April 2005, there was no disaster preparedness plan. Instead, he relied on owner Jimmy Levens for a quick how-to on getting the operation as ready as possible before Hurricane Katrina hit in late August. Unfortunately, he got an all-too-vivid illustration of why a detailed plan is needed.

"It wiped out our fences, took down buildings and made a general mess," says Bishop, general manager of the Wiggins, Miss., purebred operation. "It didn't kill any animals directly, but we lost two cows to hardware disease. We think that was probably due to some of the debris in the pastures."

Recovery wasn't quick. Salt water from

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Above: Debris in pastures after Hurricane Katrina created the potential for hardware disease.

Left: This horse and hay barn in Louisiana was destroyed by Hurricane Katrina.

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the storm surge destroyed pastures, leaving the operation in a forage deficit.

Granted, your farm or ranch may not be in a hurricane-prone area. But that still leaves tornadoes, fires, floods, blizzards … you name it. In many cases, Bishop's experience in disaster planning applies no matter what the disaster.

"Our order is humans first, then equipment, then livestock," Bishop says. "We start by buttoning the place down to be safe. Then we make sure our employees have water to drink, food and fuel. We make sure we have generators well-placed.

"Next we go to the farm," he continues. "Everybody has a job, and we focus on anything that can move with the wind — chairs, buckets, anything that can become airborne. We isolate feedbunks and mineral feeders and bolt down anything with a lid. Sidebar curtains are rolled up and fastened."

He adds, "The worst place to put valuable equipment is in a building. We put pickups, trailers and tractors in a low area away from trees."

Next are the animals. "We have a list of cows and where they are. The very expensive cows we put in a cattle barn built to withstand 180-mile-per-hour (mph) winds," he explains. "The top end of the herd we isolate in three or four designated pastures with no trees or debris. We move cows to the interior part of the ranch and try to get two fences between them and the outside of the ranch in case trees do fall on the fences. We also try to see to it they are in a low area but not one prone to flooding. We also try to move them as far away from buildings as possible."

The cattle on 7L are also individually identified in case they do get out.

"We make sure they have plenty of fresh water that is not dependent on a pump or well in case the power goes out, as well as plenty of hay," Bishop emphasizes.

Identification, whether in the form of ear tags or freeze brands, makes it easier to get cattle back in the right pastures and herds after a natural disaster.

After watching the ranches in his area get hit by Hurricanes Katrina and Ike, Don Renchie, Texas AgriLife Extension Service, adds to Bishop's list: "Have your paperwork and insurance in order." He says that ranchers thought they were covered only to find out they weren't.

"When possible, use preconstruction planning. Don't store fuel or any other combustible materials near hay. Put your fuel tank in a nonthreatening area where you can dike spills. Build your hay barn in a high area. If you put up hay or feed and it gets flooded, it is no good," he emphasizes.

The same goes for farm chemicals. Make sure they are locked up tight and can't contaminate water, hay or feed.

"When you are drilling wells, think how you can have an auxiliary power source, such as solar or a generator," Renchie continues.

"Have some portable water storage structures," he adds. "Cows will drink 15 to 20 gallons of water a day. Fill up water tanks."

Most of all — hope you don't have to use your emergency preparedness plan, but have one in place if you do.

EXTRA

Easing back to normal

No matter what the disaster, if your cattle are without feed and water for several days, proceed with caution when you do feed them. According to a Texas AgriLife Extension bulletin, start with grass or hay only and feed about 2% of their body weight, or 20 pounds (lb.) or so. Don't feed the hay if it is moldy. Wet hay is okay as long as it doesn't contain fire ants.

And by all means, offer cattle all the clean water they'll drink. During a flood or hurricane, their usual water source may have been contaminated with salt, farm chemicals or fuel. If they aren't accustomed to chlorinated water, they may refuse it. Well water is the first choice.

After a few days of hay and water, you can start supplementing the hay with grain. If you have to feed it on the ground, spread it out to reduce trampling losses and fighting. If they eat too much they can founder, bloat or get acidosis. It is usually safe to start with 0.1%-0.2% of their body weight — or 2 to 4 lb. of feed for a mature cow, or half that for calves.

As soon as you can, offer them a good, balanced mineral supplement with the proper calcium-to-phosphorus ratio. That will satisfy their craving for salt and reduce their salt water drinking.