

Disaster Preparedness for Horses

When disaster first threatens, horses should be rounded up immediately. This will make it easier to catch and rescue them if it becomes necessary to do so. Human safety should not be placed at risk to save horses. Other actions that should be taken when the threat of a disaster arises are the following:

- All electrical appliances should be unplugged. If a light must be left on, it should be a ceiling fixture.
- If water is not available from reliable troughs, it should be provided in large heavy bowls that cannot be tipped.
- All flammable and poisonous chemicals should be secured.
- If there is a danger of flooding, horses should be led to higher ground early. Often higher ground can be reached only by first traversing low ground. Food and water should be available at the higher location.

Horses cannot be transported across state lines or boarded in many places without a current negative Coggins test. Owners should keep copies of documents of this test and other documents, such as registration, ownership, and vaccination and medical records, in a safe place. Owners also should make sure that whoever is caring for the horses knows where the owners can be contacted, where the horses will be kept, and what each horse's needs are likely to be.

Identification of Horses

In several large-scale disasters when many horses had to be evacuated, identification of the horses and their owners was difficult. It is not unusual for owners to lose their horses' and their personal identification papers in a disaster. Ideally horses are uniquely and permanently identified, such as by their whorls or with a microchip or tattoo, or the owner has current photographs or other means of identifying the horses. However, when this is not the case, such as when horses have to be evacuated suddenly, emergency identification methods can be used. These include painting or etching the hooves, marking the body with crayon, and neck banding.

Veterinary Care

Depending on the type of disaster the most prominent veterinary care issues vary. Veterinarians and owners should be aware of the widespread ramifications that many disasters have even if they or their clients do not appear to be immediate victims. In high winds, tornadoes, and hurricanes, traumatic injuries predominate; in droughts and in severe winter weather, starvation and dehydration may be problems; and after fires, smoke inhalation and burn wounds are the main problems veterinarians have to address. Many disasters also have distant effects on horses, such as the deposition of debris on pastures many miles from a tornado touchdown or moldy corn after a flood.

In disasters horses from many different farms may be forced to congregate, and the risk of contagious, yet preventable, disease may be high. Some general issues that can improve the health of horses in disasters are current Coggins tests, vaccinations, and deworming. All horses should be vaccinated against tetanus after a disaster if they have not been vaccinated in the previous year. After floods horses should be vaccinated against equine encephalitides.

After a disaster horses should be thoroughly checked for injury and exposure to chemicals. If

any concerns about the health of a horse arise, a veterinarian should be consulted.

If a horse is being given medication, owners should ask the regular veterinarian to write down the name and dosage of the medication so that owners can explain the treatment to another veterinarian. Alternatively, owners should keep a 1 to 2-week supply of the medication or know where they can get it in an emergency.

A First Aid kit should include only materials that owners know how to use. All health problems with which owners are unfamiliar should be referred to a veterinarian. Useful items for a First Aid kit for horses are bandaging materials to cover wounds, antiseptic ointment, clippers, latex gloves, and tweezers. Veterinarians can also instruct their clients on First Aid for horses and advise on the contents and appropriate use of First Aid kits.

Horses that die or are euthanized must be disposed of rapidly because they are a risk to other animals. Spread of disease is possible from rodents, raccoons, possums, flies, and others. Carcasses of euthanized animals are a grave risk to the wildlife that eats them.

Supplies

Each horse should have its own halter and lead rope. Leather ropes and halters are best. Copies of the horse's medical and vaccination records and a recent photo should be available. Many boarding stables will not accept horses without proof of vaccinations.

Disasters are about the only times when horse owners truly lose their horses and have to look for them. Because proof of ownership is required to reclaim a lost horse, owners should keep identification papers, registration, and photographs in a safe deposit box.

Owners should compile a list of names, addresses, and phone numbers for veterinary care, food, and shelter for their horses in an emergency. Some examples are veterinarians, fairgrounds, humane shelters, and animal control departments. Owners should find out what the caregivers provide and what they would need from the owners. Compiling this information before a disaster ensures its availability when it is needed. During and after a disaster many people may be competing for the same limited resources and information.