

Disaster Readiness for Beef Producers



The double punch of hurricanes Katrina and Rita in the fall of 2005 was devastating to Gulf Coast beef producers. In disasters of this magnitude, it is impossible to prevent all of the devastating losses. However, advanced planning can help producers minimize the loss of animal lives and the health problems associated with all disasters. Due to the vulnerability of Louisiana to hurricanes and their potential to cause widespread damage due to high winds and flooding, hurricane preparedness is essential. And much of the disaster preparation for hurricanes will also help prepare for other disasters, such as fire, hazardous material spills, animal disease outbreaks, etc. It must be stressed that 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.

Well in advance of a potential disaster situation, producers should evaluate their herd health programs with their veterinarian. Cattle that undergo evacuation either before or after a disaster will be stressed and are likely to be commingled with other cattle. Herd biosecurity will be breached, which makes increasing herd immunity imperative. Pneumonia and abortions should be anticipated and can be minimized with proper herd nutrition and vaccinations.

Animal identification is also important. If cattle get evacuated and commingled, or escape and are later captured, it's essential to be able to identify the herd of origin through brands or tags. Many cattle look alike, and plain numbered dangle tags and tattoos can be duplicated. So if cattle aren't branded, producers should identify the farm or ranch on the dangle tag or tattoo, or use electronic identification that is unique to each individual animal. Pictures and/or videos of cattle may also help identify cattle later.

In situations such as hurricanes where advanced warning is given, health papers should be provided by a veterinarian if cattle are to be evacuated, particularly if traveling across state lines. 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. Copies of herd records, proof of ownership and registration papers should be stored in a safe place.

Beef cattle pose special problems when it comes to mass evacuation, so plans should be made weeks in advance of a potential disaster. Producers should partner with other farms to provide trucking and also evacuation space so public holding areas can be used for rescued animals. Biosecurity issues (potential for disease transmission between herds) should be discussed when making these arrangements. Producers should have safe, efficient penning and loading facilities ready in advance. Livestock trailers should be inspected to make sure they are ready for hauling long distances. If flooding or high winds are expected and animals cannot be evacuated, they should be left in large open pastures and not put in barns.

Producers should coordinate plans with other local agriculture-related groups such as Extension Services, USDA's Natural Resource Conservation Services and Farm Service Agencies, Farm Bureau, local cattlemen's associations, livestock auction markets, feed stores, etc. Different tasks such as livestock hauling; feed, fuel and generator acquisition and distribution; and animal evacuation, rescue and treatment should be assigned to individuals or groups in advance. Primary and contingent holding areas for evacuated and/or rescued cattle as well as staging areas for feed and fuel distribution should be identified in advance. Special evacuation routes for cattle should be considered so loaded trucks and trailers can keep moving to avoid heat stress in the animals. Early evacuation is necessary as roads may be closed to trailer and towing traffic as a storm approaches.

In large-scale disasters involving high numbers of cattle, providing food and fresh water is the first priority. Although difficult in many situations, efforts should be made to have an emergency supply of feed and



water stored in a safe place. Adult beef cows need 15-20 gallons of water per head per day. Storage tanks previously holding chemicals should not be used to store water. If wells depend on electricity to pump water, hand pumps or generators should be available in case of electrical outages. Producers should make their local extension office aware in advance of the numbers of animals and their locations. This will help ensure that your animals are included in immediate feed distributions if available. Otherwise, feed may not be distributed until this information can be verified, which puts the animals at risk.

Cattle 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. 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. Plastic/nylon halters and ropes should be avoided in disasters involving fire, as they may melt on the animal and cause injury. With the help of a veterinarian, an emergency supply of medications and supplies can be readied in advance.

Besides portable working facilities and corrals, other equipment needs should be arranged. Tractors and forklifts to move feed and supplies, trucks and trailers for hauling cattle, and feed and water troughs may be needed. Following widespread flooding, airboats and cowboys on horseback may be able to reach areas where cattle are stranded. Local residents familiar with the area should be dedicated in advance to acting as guides for out-of-town volunteers.

There is no way to prepare for every situation that arises in a disaster. However, by working closely with other producers and agricultural leaders, cattlemen can lessen the impact of a disaster on their operation.

Disaster Readiness Checklist

- Herd health and vaccinations up-to-date
- Animal identification
- Health papers
- Prioritize herd
- Records stored in safe location
- Evacuation plan
- Cash available for emergency purchases (credit cards may not work if power/phone service is interrupted or lines are jammed)
- Food and water for 1-2 weeks.
- Emergency equipment and first aid supplies stored
- Partner with other producers/farms
- Coordinate plans with other local agricultural groups

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