



# Natural Disaster Planning for Beef Cattle Ranches



***Christine B. Navarre, DVM***

Natural disasters come in many forms — floods, tornadoes, fires, drought, etc. Each type of disaster may require slightly different preparedness, but if an "all animals — all hazards" philosophy is taken, then cattle ranches can be ready for almost any event. "All animals" includes people. Make sure there are plans for the safety of people, too.

## *Planning and Protecting Financial Investments*

Developing emergency plans well in advance of an event provides one of the best mechanisms for livestock operations to mitigate flood risk. Facility and equipment damage, loss of cattle, and decrease in animal health and production can have serious economic effects on an operation. Producers should consider purchasing insurance policies focused on protecting their financial operations rather than depending solely on potential support from the federal government.

A detailed inventory list and photographs of equipment (including make and model), supplies, hazardous chemicals, fertilizer and fuel should be readily available before and after an event. A detailed and current livestock inventory and herd records are also musts.

## *Develop Local, Regional and State Partnerships*

Cooperation with neighboring cattlemen and other agricultural stakeholders during the planning and recovery phases is essential, especially in wide scale events. Different tasks, such as livestock hauling; feed, fuel and generator acquisition and distribution; and animal evacuation, rescue and treatment, can be assigned to individuals or groups in advance. Primary and contingent holding areas for evacuated and/or rescued cattle as well as staging areas and equipment needed for feed and fuel distribution should be identified in advance. A county or parish "feed bank" can be set up on high ground, and groups can purchase and share access to portable pens, chutes and other equipment such as air boats and high-profile vehicles necessary to perform rescues or help shelter in place. Many local jurisdictions also allow prioritized entry for livestock producers so they may provide care for their livestock.

## *Maximize Herd Health*

Cattle that are sheltered in place or evacuated will be stressed and may be commingled with other cattle, so herd biosecurity may be breached. Healthy cattle endure this stress with fewer health and production effects. Maintaining cattle in good body condition and keeping vaccination protocols up to date are imperative.

## *Animal Identification and Record Keeping*

Disaster-ready animal identification and record keeping should be part of normal operations. Copies of records should be stored in a remote location or in cloud-based programs. Access to herd records, proof of ownership and registration papers may be necessary. Store original papers in a portable fire-and-flood-proof box that can be taken during an evacuation.

Should cattle get evacuated and commingled, or escape and are later captured, it's essential to be able to identify the herd of origin. Many cattle look alike, and plain numbered dangle tags and tattoos may be duplicated by other producers. Tags can also be cut out by rustlers, who may take advantage of disaster situations. Hot or freeze branding with a registered brand is the most fool-proof way of identifying herd of origin. If cattle aren't branded, producers should at least identify the farm or ranch on the dangle tag or use official USDA identification that is unique to each individual animal. Pictures and videos can also help with identification. In emergency situations where there is not time to uniquely identify animals, then the ranch name, location and contact number can be spray painted on animals.

## *Stockmanship*

Low-stress cattle handling is also a critical component of disaster planning for beef cattle operations. Cattle behavior can drastically change following a flood or other major weather event, making them reluctant to be driven or corralled. Herds that are used to low-stress handling techniques make rescue and movements before, during or after an event safer and less stressful for both cattle and handlers. Being able to quietly move cattle may be the difference between life and death.

## *Plans for Cattle Evacuation and/or Shelter in Place*

Emergency plans for livestock operations that are at risk for flooding should address evacuation and/or sheltering-in-place. The ranch veterinarian can help with biosecurity concerns and movement papers if necessary.

If evacuating cattle is not possible, they should be left in large, open pastures. Topography and flood maps and maps of fences, gates and roads make moving cattle during and after an event safer.

Minimize the presence of equipment, supplies and debris that may become airborne with high winds or encountered in floodwaters.

- Keep trees trimmed around barns, roads and fences.
- Keep tin on barns and shops secure.
- Attach extra guide wires to augers on grain bins.
- Maintain cattle trailers in good working condition.
- Maintain penning and loading facilities in good working order and make fencing repairs in a timely manner.

Providing fresh water, food and shelter will be most critical immediately after an event. Especially during flooding, strategically locating equipment and supplies that cannot be evacuated to high ground will make shelter-in-place a more viable option. Items to consider moving to high ground include the following.

- Tractors and equipment for moving hay, repairing fences and transporting livestock.
- Round bales of high-quality hay.
- Emergency water supply (used chemical storage tanks should not be used for storing emergency supplies of water).
- Water and feed troughs (these should be filled with water or placed inside of a livestock trailer).
- Fence repair supplies or portable panels (placed inside of a trailer).
- Hand pumps or generators in case of electrical outages.

### *Preparedness Checklist*

- Make sure family and farm personnel are safe.
- Move cattle to predetermined safest location.
  - If time doesn't permit, open gates and/or cut fences to allow cattle to seek high ground or other safe locations themselves.
- Check emergency supplies of feed and water.
  - Fill emergency water tanks with fresh water.
- Move equipment to safe location.
  - Setup generator in place before storm.
  - Fill all tractors, vehicles, generators and storage containers with fuel.
  - Secure equipment, logs, fuel tanks, feed troughs and bins, etc. that are prone to floating or being blown away.
  - Remove shade cloth from portable shade structures.
  - Seal well cap and top of well casing.
  - Turn off water and electricity.

### *Share the plan*

Make sure all family and farm personnel understand the ranch plans and have plans of their own for personal and family safety. Make sure everyone knows where water and electricity cutoffs are located. It is advisable to also share the emergency plan with nearby ranchers and other veterinarians in case the ranch owner is unavailable during or immediately after an event. The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic is a reminder that cattle ranches need to have plans in place in case employees, including management, become ill.

**March 2020**

