

# Farmstead Evacuation During a Fire

## SETTING PRIORITIES IN AN EMERGENCY

**Fires are dangerous anywhere, but on the farm they pose unique perils for animals and their owners. Toxic fumes can kill or cause permanent lung damage. Panicked animals behave unpredictably or refuse to respond to normal handling approaches. They may trap themselves and their rescuers in a rapidly spreading fire.**

**Work with your local fire department to minimize fire risk on your farm. Formulate an emergency fire plan and practice it regularly with family members and employees. Likewise, conduct periodic fire safety inspections. (See the fact sheet “Fire Prevention and Safety on the Farm.”) Above all, remember that your first priority should always be human safety—and that includes you.**

## PRIORITIES

People have been seriously injured or killed when trying to save animals, grain or equipment on their farms. They forget that smoke and toxic fumes can kill them in seconds.

- ◆ *Human safety, including your own life, must be your first priority.* Make sure you, your family members and employees are safe. Call the fire department immediately and let the experts take control. If you can use a fire extinguisher on a small fire, do so. But realize its limitations in the face of a fast-moving blaze.
- ◆ *Your property, as a business investment, comes second.* When your farmstead is burning, it's time to make your hardest business decisions. Firefighting crews may ask you which building to save first, second, third, etc. Ask yourself if it is more important to save livestock, machinery or feed. If a livestock building is on fire, animals may already have been exposed to deadly heat, smoke and gases. It may be safer and more realistic to save an adjacent building or vehicles stored inside it.

## CALLING THE FIRE DEPARTMENT

- ◆ *When calling the fire department, be prepared to give accurate and complete information, including:*
  - a) The exact location of your farm.
  - b) The extent and location of the fire.
  - c) The color of smoke coming from the burning structure(s). For example: “A lot of black smoke is coming from the back of the vehicle storage building.” This helps firefighters know what materials are burning and what materials they need to fight the fire.
  - d) Anything else the dispatcher requests. Stay on the line until the dispatcher is through collecting all the necessary information.
- ◆ *Make sure the fire department has complete access to the blaze.* Do not let vehicles, livestock or people block the driveway or access to buildings. This is a typical problem for firefighters. It can only lead to greater damage and danger for all concerned.
- ◆ *Alert firefighters to potential hazards, including pesticide and chemical storage areas and fuel tanks.*

## AFFECTED LIVESTOCK

**If animals have suffered from heat, smoke inhalation or burns, get a veterinarian to examine and treat them immediately. If possible, spray water on animals to cool them.**

**Some animals may need to be destroyed. According to meat safety laws in Wisconsin, animals that have died from fire (or any means other than slaughter) are automatically condemned and cannot be sold for food. Injured animals need state certification from a veterinarian before they can be sold for slaughter. For more information, call the Meat Inspection and Safety Bureau at the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection at (608) 266-2227.**

## LIVESTOCK BUILDINGS

Livestock evacuation is very risky business. If fire or smoke is significant within an animal building, the danger is generally too great to risk your own life. Some considerations include:

- ◆ *Smoke, fire, burning insulation and toxic fumes.* Some types of insulation consume oxygen, give off poisonous smoke or “rain fire” — that is, they may melt and drip as they burn. Fiberglass doesn't burn. Be aware of the type of insulation in your barns and anticipate how it might react in a blaze. Remember that smoke inhalation and heat already may have harmed your animals to the extent they need to be destroyed. Don't be the next victim.
- ◆ *Animals may refuse to leave the building.* Cows and horses tend to panic if they are frightened or forced to use a secondary exit. In some cases, evacuated animals run back into burning buildings. Some farmers have had luck leading a few panicked animals out by throwing a gunnysack over their heads.
- ◆ *Don't become trapped.* If you are able to evacuate animals, be sure you are not leading them toward a dead-end, such as a gate that won't open outward.
- ◆ *Containment may be the best answer.* Oxygen fuels a fire. Sometimes it is best to close the doors and wait for the fire department. Poultry buildings, especially, are prone to flash fires because of their construction and the large amounts of dust inside. If you open the door, a burning poultry building is likely to burst into flames.
- ◆ *Smoldering hay.* If hay is slowly smoldering in an upper level of a barn or silo, call the fire department and, if possible, begin evacuation. This is one instance where you may have enough time for a quiet, orderly evacuation. DO NOT try to throw smoldering hay out a window or door; exposure to oxygen fuels a blaze.

### **Additional resources:**

Your local fire department, your county agricultural agent, the National Fire Protection Association

### **Related publications:**

“Fire Control in Livestock Buildings,” (NRAES 39), the Northeast Regional