



Wildfire Disaster Preparedness Tips for Horse Owners

The recent fires in El Paso, Boulder and Jefferson Counties are reminders that we should all have a disaster plan in place that includes evacuation plans, and shelter-in-place scenarios. Your disaster plans should focus on the chief vulnerabilities of the area in which you live. Here in Colorado, that usually means wildfire, particularly for those of us who live in the urban-wildland interface – whether in the foothills, mountains, or plains. These beautiful, often rural, locations where the wilderness meets human habitation are the same locations where wildfire is most likely to rage.

Your disaster plans should be well-thought out, and practiced so that they can be smoothly executed under the stress and fear of a real disaster. We've compiled some important tips for you to keep in mind when creating disaster plans for your horses.

Trailer Loading: Possibly the single most important thing you can do to prepare your horse for a wildfire or other disaster is to make sure that they will load easily and quickly into any trailer. If someone else is loading your horse for evacuation, be it a neighbor, emergency worker, or boarding stable staff, they probably won't be using your trailer. Horses that will load easily into a stock trailer might not be willing to get into a smaller, darker two-horse trailer, particularly with a stranger during a stressful situation. If your horse refuses to load, it's likely they will be left behind. Practice loading your horse into many different kinds of trailers so they will be familiar with the experience and more likely to load safely and quickly in an emergency.

Identification: The ability to identify your horse is also extremely important. They will likely be housed at an evacuation facility with many other animals, and they may have been brought in by someone other than you or a family member. Keep with you a file that includes photos of you with your horse, close up photos of all sides of your horse as well as identifying markings, brands or tattoos, any health information records (coggins test, vaccination records, medical conditions, allergies, etc), and microchip and brand inspection papers in something watertight, like a Ziploc baggie. DO NOT keep identification papers with your horse as it makes it very easy for thieves to 'claim' them and take them across state lines. To identify your horse, a strip of duct tape on their neck with their name, your name, phone number written in waterproof sharpie type ink works well. If your horse is being hauled with a halter on, dog tags can be a good identification idea. ***If you HAVE to leave your horse behind, NEVER turn them loose while they are wearing a halter.***



Trees crowning in a wildland fire

Quick Reference Tips

- Make sure your horse will load quickly and safely into any trailer
- Make sure your horse can be identified, and keep all paperwork and proof of ownership with you.
- Bring a basic first aid kit for emergency care.
- Have redundant back up evacuation plans, and post detailed instructions in your barn for emergency workers.
- Have 3 days supply of feed, and the tack you want to take with you easily accessible.
- Have a plan to shelter in place if the fire moves too quickly for you to evacuate your horses.



Horses backlit by wildfire

“Wildfires move astonishingly quickly. The faster you can get your family and your animals out of the way of a fire, the more likely you are to find safety without any loss of life.”

First Aid Kit: Have a basic first aid kit that could be used for emergencies like colic, wound care, foot injuries or lameness in an easily accessible location that you can grab and go. It’s also handy for emergency shelters to have access to your first aid kit once you arrive, particularly in the early hours of a disaster when they may not have as many supplies as they need yet. It’s a good idea to consult with your veterinarian and include some basic medications like Phenylbutazone (Bute) or Flunixin Meglumine (Banamine) pastes.

Tack: Know what tack you want to take and be sure to include halters, lead ropes, and water buckets in the list. If there is ANY chance that you may have to trailer your horse past fire, do not use nylon tack as it can melt and burn in extreme heat.

Have redundant backup plans: Enlist the help of neighbors and/or friends to get your horse out in case you are at work, on vacation, or otherwise not around when a fire starts. Have at least two other people who can come by with a trailer to load and evacuate your horses. Post detailed instructions in your barn regarding where everything is so your backup helpers or emergency workers can quickly grab everything and go.

Feed: Keep a three day supply of hay, feed, and medications ready to go so it can be loaded and hauled out quickly.

Know your boarding stables’ emergency procedures: If your horse resides at a boarding stable, find out what their emergency procedures are and do your part to make sure your horse is ready to go when the staff or emergency workers are given an evacuation notice. If your boarding stable doesn’t have an emergency procedure, help them to create one.

Shelter in place: In case you are simply not able to get your horses out, have a plan for them to shelter in place. NEVER leave them in a barn. They should shelter in a pasture where all vegetation has been removed with at least a 4 day supply of food and water. All horses should be properly identified with the methods described above, and should not wear any halter PERIOD. Halters on turned out horses CAN and DO get caught and cause more problems than they solve!!

Wildfires can start unexpectedly and move astonishingly quickly. The faster you can get yourself, your family, and your animals out of the way of a fire, the more likely you are to find shelter and safety without any loss of life, freeing firefighters and emergency workers to fight fire instead of worrying about you.

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