

Have horses? Consider these tips from UGA Extension to keep them safe during a hurricane

Dr. Julia S. McCann
University of Georgia Cooperative Extension
September 8, 2017

Hurricane-force winds and rain may inspire feelings of helplessness. In a hurricane, evacuation of all humans and their animals is ideal, but for some, evacuation may seem more challenging than riding out the storm.

Georgians are suddenly facing the reality of Hurricane Irma's path inland. If horses and their owners must hunker down or, worse, if they are caught in an evacuation before reaching designated shelter, the following tips from University of Georgia Cooperative Extension may help to ensure a more positive outcome.

1. Make sure all horses are easily identified. Breakaway halters with the owner's information written on plastic livestock or luggage tags, or information sealed in zip-close bags and secured to a neckband or halter — could prove invaluable. Clip the phone number on the coat of the horse using clippers. Paint contact information on the horse with spray paint or a grease crayon (for livestock). Consider including a second phone number, a phone number for someone safely out of the storm area who could provide information if the owner is unavailable.
2. Tie down anything that strong winds could send airborne, like hay feeders, grain or mineral feeders, and even manure spreaders. Get arena jumps out of open areas, where they could be picked up by strong winds and cause damage. Move trailers from areas near trees that may fall or low-lying areas where floodwaters may rise. In a previous storm, fast-rising waters from a normally sleepy mountain stream created a raging river, and a trailer was saved by tying it to the trees (no truck was available in the very short time frame).
3. Spare halters and leads secured in another location can be life-saving if the barn is seriously damaged. A tornado or strong winds can damage structures and release horses to fields with damaged fencing. Spare halters can be used when all other security options have been blown away. Keep in mind that finding wind-blown halters in the dark can be especially challenging.
4. Clean any container on hand and fill it with fresh water. Cover the containers if possible. Have some chlorine bleach available as water may be purified with two drops of chlorine bleach added to one quart of water and waiting 30 minutes. If the horses are reluctant to drink, a small amount of flavoring, molasses, apple juice or sports drink may enhance water intake.

5. Move all essential feed and equipment to the highest, potentially driest storage facility. Encase everything in plastic, if possible. Pack medicines, antibiotic ointments, sedative, anti-inflammatory items such as banamine and phenylbutizone, bandages and other emergency equipment. Chain saws, fuel, flashlights, batteries, hammers, nails, screws and materials for patching fences should be ready if needed in an emergency repair situation.

6. Close stall windows, secure all doors and remove all items from the hall, aisle, walls or any open space. Remove items from window areas. Lunge lines and other ropes are helpful in an array of emergencies, so keep them accessible and with other emergency equipment.

7. Whether to put the horses inside barns or in fenced fields is up to the owner and depends on flooding risks, locations of power lines that may fall and the strength of the structures. A tornado that devastated one horse farm resulted in six dead horses — three were inside the barn and three were outside the barn. All four block walls of a stall collapsed and one horse was safely standing in the only 3-by-4-foot space left. This is a tough decision, and a sound recommendation that covers all situations can't be made ahead of the event unless the structure is in a flood zone and drowning is a sure bet if horses are left in that structure. The presence of electrical or barb wire fencing offer greater safety away from these hazards.

8. Keep the horses' vaccination records and Coggins papers available for easy access and in plastic, of course, in case the horses have to be evacuated or taken to clinics for treatment. Send a photo of essential documents to someone safely out of the storm area so the records may be accessed if hard copies became inaccessible. Always work with horses to ensure they will load onto a trailer if an emergency occurs.

9. "Zello," a free app, enables smartphones to work on 3G, use less power and act as walkie-talkies with emergency personnel or others who have the app.

10. Before the storm, take photos of everything for insurance purposes. It may be difficult to remember tack and equipment in the aftermath of disaster, and verification of more valuable items is much easier with photos.

Evacuation is certainly the safest way to survive a hurricane or other natural disaster, yet perhaps these tactics derived from real experience and observations will help owners deal with the challenges that may lie ahead.