

Fire Season - Are you prepared?

by Lyn Hood

There were over 1000 wild land fires in California last year, and we were not the only state that was burning, or that will burn in the future.

During the three fires in our small county on the central coast of California last Spring, the Santa Cruz County Equine Evacuation unit rescued over 400 horses and many other animals and livestock. I'd hazard a guess that over 700 horses were actually relocated temporarily if you count those also moved by owners, friends and other volunteers to friend's houses and private barns, in addition to those moved by our unit.

It was literally a trial by fire. I heard some amazing stories from our team members who got horses into trailers that had never been in one before. Some people have a sixth sense and an innate ability to read an animal and respond appropriately with the right timing. During the first fire we evacuated over 200 horses in about 5 hours with no injuries other than one leg scrape. Our volunteers didn't stop at evacuating horses, we also transported llamas, alpaca, chickens, ducks, cats, dogs, goats, goldfish, turtles and at least one large, old blind pig.

Our Equine Evacuation Unit is ten years old this year. We work under the direction of the County Office of Emergency Services. We have over 200 certified county disaster workers with horse experience and trailers, broken into 10 teams based on the geography of the county. Until the fires, we had been called out to one flood evacuation, and we have been on alert, but not activated for a fire in an adjacent county.



Martin fire trailer staging area

During the first two fires, we were fortunate to be ahead of the curve, evacuating horses from areas before the fire got to them. During the last fire, we were not so fortunate. The fire either got there first or it was nipping at our heels. The third fire started about 2pm on a Friday while most people were at work. The local roads and adjacent highway were closed almost immediately during rush hour traffic making it logistically impossible to get our rescue teams into place quickly due to gridlock. The first people on the scene were people who lived in the area and the results while well intended, were chaotic. We lost at least 6 horses to that fire, at three different locations. Working under the direction of County Animal Services who took the calls for help and dispatched our rigs, our Equine Evacuation Unit saved over 150 horses that day. Our Equine Evacuation volunteers were allowed behind fire lines because all of our members are trained in SEMS, the Standardized Emergency Management System, and SIMS, the Incident Command System and understand the importance of roles and reporting structure. Being trained in these systems has given our group credibility with local law enforcement and fire agencies which has allowed us



Summit fire smoke seen from fairgrounds boarding area



Evacuated horses at fairgrounds



Trailers bringing in evacuated horses

Do you have an evacuation plan for your horses and other animals if fire or another type of disaster happens to you?

Have you made your property as fire safe as possible? It may be possible to shelter in place during a fire if you have enough clearance around you. Your local fire department will come out and assess your fire danger and give you suggestions for making your property more fire safe.

If you board your horse, are you familiar with your barn's disaster or evacuation plan? If they don't have one, volunteer to help put one together.

Do you have halters and lead ropes easily visible, with contact information by each horse or at the pasture gate?

Does your horse know how to lead and load?

If you do not have a horse trailer or enough trailer space for all your horses, have you made arrangements with a friend that lives fairly close by (but not so close they will be evacuating their own animals) to come to your aid in an emergency?

Do you have a sign by your front door noting what type and how many animals you have inside your home so that Animal Services knows what to look for? These signs are available free from United Animal Nations (UAN. ORG).

Is your address clearly visible from the street so emergency responders can find you?

If you have answered no to ANY of those questions, you need to work on your disaster plan. Many resources are available on line to help you design a disaster plan that works for you, and your animals.

If you do call for help, please tell emergency responders how many and what type of animals to have. Have them caught and ready for us to load, not loose in a pasture.

Tell us what kind of access there is to your property. If horse trailers drive a mile down a dirt drive on the side of a mountain to your house, is there room at the bottom for us to turn around and get out? Can you lead horses out to us?

If you get help from neighbors or friends before emergency responders can get to your house, please call and cancel us so that we can help someone else.

Opening barns or corrals for horses and letting them loose can endanger both the horses and emergency personnel. If you're close enough to let them loose, grab a rope and lead them out.

Our community was very fortunate to have a cadre of trained disaster workers who specialize in equine evacuation, and a dedicated and resourceful Animal Services department that worked together to rescue, house and return all of the animals that were displaced in the fire.



Hay purchased by Santa Cruz County Office of Emergency Services to feed the evacuated horses



More trailers bringing in evacuated horses



Horses ready to evacuate

The Santa Cruz County Equine Evacuation Unit did an amazing job and I am incredibly proud to be a part of this group of dedicated volunteers. Still I mourn for the 6 horses we lost, and we are continuing our training so that we can improve the odds that every horse can survive the next disaster.

www.EquineEvac.org

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