

Horse Stable Fire Prevention and Preparation Tips

In the back of the mind of every horse, stable, or ranch owner lies the fear of a barn fire, buffered by the hope that he or she is prepared to deal with such a crisis. The San Antonio Saddle Horse Association (SASHA) recently offered a fire prevention and safety seminar to help educate horse owners on the best ways to keep their barns safe from fire and how to deal with a fire should one occur.

The seminar was conducted by the Boerne, Texas, Fire Department's Lieutenant Lyle Mattick, firefighter Gerard Silva, and members of the San Antonio Fire Department, and took place at a San Antonio area horse farm. The speakers were able to give seminar attendees many invaluable fire safety tips, and were able to use the farm to demonstrate how a fire would be dealt with in an emergency situation.

"Inviting your local fire department out to your barn for a tour is the best thing you can do," says Sandra Arguello, SASHA President. "This visit gave the firefighters a chance to familiarize themselves with the layout of the barn and surrounding buildings and paddocks and gain some familiarity with the everyday equipment that horse owners take for granted."

The members of SASHA strongly stress the importance of having your own preparedness training. Whether your barn is large or small, residential or commercial, ask your local fire station to visit. Allow them to prepare a plan for their records. This will improve the safety of your facility and provide peace of mind, knowing they are prepared to help you survive a potential disaster. Also, many firefighters might never have put a halter on a horse, and you can offer them the opportunity to practice on one of your horses. It could help the firefighters save a horse's life in the future.

The following are some of the helpful hints for preventing fires and dealing with them should they occur; many of these tips apply to the home as well as to the barn.

Plan Ahead For an Emergency

- At the first sign of a fire, call 911. You should also know the number of the closest department to your farm as a backup contact. Have these numbers posted next to each phone in the barn and programmed in your cell phone.
- Be specific when you provide your address so emergency services can dispatch the closest emergency responders.
- If your farm is gated, record your gate code with the fire department so they can get in without having to stop and force open the gate. Every fire department makes a "Knox Key" available at a cost of around \$200.00. This is a master box

and key installed at your gate by a professional locksmith. The fire department has a secure, master key on each truck, enabling the most expedient access during an emergency.

- Evaluate the driveway that responding trucks will have to navigate and be sure there is enough width and height for the trucks to maneuver.
- Electrical power will be shut off by the fire department when they arrive for safety reasons, so all farms should have several strategically located flashlights available with batteries that are periodically checked and replaced as needed.
- Have a system for knowing which, if any, patrons are at the barn. Secure their safety, as well as your own, before attempting to rescue any animals.
- When loss of human life is not compromised, begin to remove the horses. Know ahead of time where the horses will be turned out once they're safely out of the barn, and be sure to secure all gates to the turn-outs to prevent the horses from escaping during an already chaotic time.

Around the Barn

- *Never* allow smoking in or near the barn. Display "No Smoking" signs throughout the barn to ensure patrons are aware of the rule. Provide a safe container--located a safe distance from the barn--in which patrons who smoke can place cigarette butts to reduce the risk that they will be deposited on the ground.
- Keep the barn aisles clean and clear of carts, tack, and other items that would accelerate a fire or hinder a rescue attempt. Lightly moisten dirt aisle ways and arena footing on a regular basis to keep dust down and reduce fire risk; use caution if wetting concrete aisle ways, as this can result in a slippery surface.
- Remove cobwebs from the barn and surrounding buildings regularly. Cobwebs are flammable and allow fire to spread very rapidly.
- Keep grass mowed short around the barn. A fire in a closely mowed area can be all but extinguished by using a common broom dipped in a bucket of water and "swept" across the fire line, while long, dry, and unkempt areas can foster an out-of-control firestorm very quickly.
- Smoke detectors don't always work in a barn environment due to dust that can be interpreted as smoke by the device. Instead, you can install a heat detector in the barn and a remote receiver in your house that will trigger an alarm in the event a significant increase in temperature is detected in the barn.
- Learn how to properly dispose of/store combustible materials. Heat can build up to the point of a spontaneous combustion fire in piles of mulch, clippings, and manure. If not taken off site, manure should be spread across a wide area to keep the naturally occurring heat and gases given off by decay from increasing to the point of combustion.
- Be sure to pick up, clean, and carefully store dirty, greasy, and oily rags or other chemicals that are common around the barn. For example, linseed oil, that's commonly top-dressed on feed, is very flammable, particularly if it's allowed to accumulate on rags and pile up in a mass. It can generate considerable heat and combust very easily.

- Have enough large fire extinguishers and be sure everyone knows how to operate them. It is recommended that barns have one fire extinguisher every 20-30 feet, generally easily accessible in the barn aisles. Keep one in each horse trailer as well.
- When using the extinguisher, remember PASS:
 - Pull the pin at the top of the extinguisher*
 - Aim at the base of the fire, not the flames*
 - Squeeze the lever slowly*
 - Sweep from side to side*
- Using a sweeping motion, move the fire extinguisher back and forth until the fire is completely out. Operate the extinguisher from a safe distance, several feet away, and then move towards the fire once it starts to diminish. Be sure to read the instructions on your fire extinguisher - different fire extinguishers recommend operating them at different distances from the fire. Remember, aim at the base of the fire, not at the flames. In order to extinguish a fire, you must extinguish the fuel!
- It is important to have your fire extinguisher inspected annually and perform any necessary maintenance. It is recommended that the extinguisher be taken to a fire equipment professional for this, as they have the skills and equipment to keep your fire extinguisher in good working order. For more information on fire extinguishers and fire extinguisher safety, visit FireExtinguisher.com.
- Conduct a practice fire drill with all stable employees and/or volunteers, grooms, owners and students so they know what to do in the case of any emergency.
- Hay, particularly oat hay, can generate heat if it's not properly dried after cutting. Spontaneous combustion fires in oat hay can be a common source of fire. Monitor bales of hay frequently to be sure they are cool and dry between and in the middle of the stacked bales. Combustion will start deeper in the stack where heat accumulates, not on the outer layers. Store all hay in a well-ventilated area, preferably away from the barn and the horses.
- Be sure all the electrical wiring in and around the barn is safe. It's a good idea to have it inspected regularly and, if necessary, have it repaired or updated by a professional.

Horses and Fire

- Many barns will keep stall doors closed even if they aren't occupied by a horse. Develop an easy-to-understand sign/code for each stall so a fireman or other person rendering aid won't waste valuable time opening and searching empty stalls. Remember, there won't be any electricity and smoke from the fire could severely limit visibility.
- Ensure that every stall has a halter and a lead line nearby.
- Even 15-30 seconds spent in a stall may mean the difference between life and death. If a horse refuses to come out of the stall or is panicked, one of the most effective ways to coax him out of the stall is by covering his eyes. Use anything handy to fashion a blindfold, such as a saddle pad, shirt, or jacket. If he still refuses to move, move on to the next one.

- Be sure to properly secure the gates when animals have been removed from the barn and placed in a paddock. A loosely tethered gate can allow a panicked horse to get loose and injure emergency workers, get hit by responders' vehicles, or run back into the barn (especially if his barn mates are still inside).

SASHA urges all equestrian professionals and horse owners to get to know their local fire departments. Although you might never need the services of your local emergency responders, it's important to be prepared and give yourself and the animals you love the best chance for survival should a fire occur.