

Fire Season is Here: Is Your Ranch Ready?

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We're in the midst of wildfire season in the Sierra foothills. With record-setting forage production in much of the region, many of us are bracing for another challenging summer and autumn.

Wildfire preparations are more complicated for commercial livestock operations. Like our neighbors, we need to create a fire safe space around our homes; we also need to think about protecting ranch infrastructure and livestock. If you haven't prepared a ranch fire safety plan, or even if you have one in place, the beginning of fire season is a reminder that we all need to be prepared! Here are a few ideas for putting together a plan for your operation.



Assessing the Threat

What is at risk in your operation? Do you have livestock in multiple locations? What is access like to your home place as well as to rented properties? As I think about our sheep operation, the following issues come to mind:

- We need to protect our home, barns and other infrastructure at our home place.
- We have livestock in several locations. Where we have irrigated pasture, we aren't quite as worried about fire. Where we're grazing on dry grass, we are more concerned. While fire is an immediate threat to the health and well-being of our animals, it can also reduce the amount of fall forage we'll have.
- Access can be a challenge during a fire. Single-lane roads, law enforcement road blocks and other obstacles may make it difficult to get our livestock during a fire.
- Smoke can create health problems for people and livestock alike. About ten years ago, during a particular smoky stretch of the summer, we had an increase in respiratory disease in our sheep.

Because many of us have operations that are spread over multiple locations, getting timely and accurate information about where fires are can be challenging as well. I find that www.yubanet.com usually has the most up-to-date information on fire location and size - be sure to check the "Happening Now" tab. CalFire also has a phone app that purports to send alerts when fires start near your location, although I've found that the app doesn't provide the real-time information I need about small local fires. Many of us have informal phone trees with the other ranchers in our area - this can be the best way to get in-the-moment information! Be sure you know the neighbors where your livestock are grazing!

Developing and Implementing a Plan

A ranch wildfire plan should have several main components:

1. **Protecting Buildings, Infrastructure and Information:** All of us should make our home places fire safe! Remove flammable vegetation within 100 feet of your home and other buildings. Don't forget other critical infrastructure like propane tanks, wells, equipment sheds and barns. Also be sure you have protected critical legal documents and

insurance information. You should also check CalFire's suggestions for putting together an emergency supply kit (<http://www.readyforwildfire.org/Emergency-Supply-Kit/>).

2. **Protecting Forage:** Many of us stock our operations conservatively to ensure that we have fall forage for our livestock. You might consider creating fuel breaks to protect this forage. Disking or grading around the perimeter of pastures, or at least adjacent to potential ignition sources. Another alternative would be to use targeted grazing adjacent to roads or pasture boundaries - this can reduce the fuel load and slow a fire down. The width of any fuel break depends on the fuel type, topography/slope, and potential flame lengths that a fire might generate.
3. **Protecting Livestock:** We try to think ahead of how we might move animals out of harm's way. Given enough warning, we would either haul livestock away from a fire or herd them to a safe location. Many of us, however, have too many animals to evacuate on short notice. Leaving animals in pasture (or "sheltering in place") might be the best option in many cases. If you need to leave animals in place, be sure they have enough feed and water for several days. Will the animals have water if the power goes out? Be sure to take down temporary fences or other hazards that may injure animals as the fire moves through your property.
4. **Water Supply:** Water is critical for protecting our properties and for keeping livestock healthy. Do you have adequate water supplies for wetting down your buildings and facilities, or for directly fighting fire? If you have to pump water, do you have a backup system in case you lose power? Can you provide stock water if the power goes out? You may wish to consider investing in a backup generator and/or additional water storage.
5. **Escape Routes:** Ideally, we should all have at least two routes in and out of our ranch properties. We try to think about at least two alternatives for moving our livestock to safety in the event of a fire - and this means loading and unloading facilities, a plan for gathering livestock, and a clear understanding of the road system near our pastures. Narrow roads can be problematic for navigating with stock trailers, especially when fire equipment is also inbound.
6. **Backup:** Obviously, we can't all be on hand 24 hours a day, seven days a week to respond to a fast-moving fire. Consider working with friends, neighbors or colleagues to have a backup plan to evacuate or otherwise protect your livestock. Consider meeting with your neighbors to go over key livestock facilities, evacuation plans and access routes. Be sure to check in with these backup resources in the event of fire.
7. **Communication Plans:** Do you have phone numbers for the other ranchers in your area? Do you know who runs the cows or sheep next door? Most of us probably do! During fire season, many of us text or call our neighbors when we see smoke. Perhaps it's time to formalize these calling trees. Contact me at dmacon@ucanr.edu if you'd like help setting up a calling tree for your area.
8. **Situational Awareness:** If you're like me, your ear can tell the difference between a fire plane and a regular aircraft. Whenever I'm outside this time of year, I scan the horizon for smoke - especially when I hear fire planes overhead. I carry fire tools and a 5-gallon backpack pump in my truck during fire season, as well, and I'm constantly aware of my surroundings when I'm working in dry grass or brushland.

Wildfire, obviously, is a significant threat in our region - and one that can be incredibly stressful to livestock and people alike. Preparation - though planning, improving our stockmanship skills, making our homes and ranches fire safe - can help reduce this stress. For more information, check out these resources:

<http://cesutter.ucanr.edu/LivingWithFire/>

http://www.calfire.ca.gov/communications/downloads/fact_sheets/Animalevacuation.pdf

http://www.uvm.edu/~ascibios/?Page=Emergency/Disaster_Planning_for_Livestock.html&SM=s_ubmenuemergency.html

For ideas on writing down your fire plan, see

<http://ucanr.edu/blogs/blogcore/postdetail.cfm?postnum=27693>.