

Agriculture: Before and after the storm

Being located inland doesn't mean Highlands County doesn't get its share of wind and rain during hurricanes and tropical storms. We learned that in 2004 with hurricanes Charley, Jeanne and Frances. Many residents and homeowners have the option of riding the storm out or evacuating. Some residents simply don't have that option and need to stay put for the welfare of their land and animals.

Most producers and landowners don't have the luxury of "evacuating" when the storms come. After all, the animals and crops in their pastures and fields rely completely on them for their safety and well being. But, as with all situations, there are many things that can be done in advance to help make the impact of the coming storm less damaging and prepare for the safety of livestock and crops.

One of the first steps is to know the area. For example, if the property is located in a flood zone, moving equipment and animals to higher ground would be a good step. If there is no "safe" place for the livestock, it may be necessary to call on neighboring landowners and see if they can assist in the transport and sheltering of the animals.

As with anyone, producers need to make sure to have emergency supplies on hand. Plywood, fencing, fresh water and extra feed for livestock are essentials. Storage of these items should be in an area that is easily accessible and elevated off the ground. Barns and outbuildings should be storm proofed as much as possible.

For identification purposes, each animal should be marked with a unique I.D. and contact number if possible. Just in case the livestock wanders off during or after the storm, this would ensure that the animal is returned to its rightful owner.

Some additional tips from the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences are listed below:

- Scout your property and barn structures – where are your animal the safest? Check the condition of the barn including the roof. If the barn is not safe, consider open fields but check for location of power lines and number of trees. Further, check your fence rows for weak areas or if trees can fall on your fence line allowing animals to escape. Take steps to secure your fence if needed. Remove any poisonous plants and trees. Trees that have fallen or flooded areas may force animals to nibble on other forages they may not normally eat that can be toxic to them.
- Pick up all debris/limbs from pastures and around the home. Objects such as tree limbs can become flying objects and injure animals.
- Place livestock hurricane kits/plans in a safe visible location.
- Have your evacuation kit ready. All vaccinations and paperwork should be up to date along with the medical history of animals, proof of ownership, a list of animals (i.e. species, breed, age, sex, color and characteristics) and photos if possible.
- Make sure to have an emergency contact list made out and a 3-7 day supply of food and any other items needed to care for animals such as water buckets, ropes, etc.

- Have your first aid kit ready. Suggestions from IFAS include, wound ointment, saline solution, eye ointment, bandages, scissors, tape, cotton rolls, vet wrap, Peroxide, 1% iodine wound, mineral oil, Pepto-Bismol, tweezers, towel/washcloth/latex gloves, thermometer, all medications, liniment ointment and fly spray.
- Have an emergency barn kit ready. This kit should include a chain saw, fuel, chain lubricant, saw, hammers, nails, screws, duct tape, screwdrivers, fencing materials, plywood, tarps, flashlights, batteries, and ladder. This kit should be placed in a secure area.

Once the storm has passed, check on the animals and keep them as calm as possible allowing them to rest and sleep if needed. Survey the property and check for live wires, sharp or damaged objects, dangerous wildlife, contaminated water, damaged fences or any other hazards. Release livestock in a safe, dry place and watch for fire ants and other dangerous insects that will look for dry places to nest. If any animal is missing, post notices and contact code enforcement and animal control.

These are just some of the ways that the agricultural community can be prepared. Tropical Storm Fay was a good wake up call for everyone and hopefully we can all stay safe this hurricane season.