

Preparing for Forest Fires

By Eric Hoffman

- 1 The Boy Scout axiom, “Be prepared” is your best hedge to not succumbing to a wildfire. This means having two plans: One for your family and personal items and one for your livestock. Plan ahead.
- 2 Create a “defensible space.” Fire fighters talk about and look for homes and properties with “defensible space.” Defensible space means minimizing the amount of fuel around your house and livestock holding areas. To learn more about how to create the best “defensible space” for your situation visit fire stations in your area and/or make use of the internet. You can install sprinklers on your home and barn. You might consider getting a self-contained water pumping system because power often is switched off as fire approaches an area.
- 3 Plant non-toxic fire resistant plants. Fire fighting agencies in fire sensitive areas have lists of ornamental plants that are fire resistant, but be warned many of the plants on the lists I’ve seen are toxic and would be harmful to livestock, if consumed. As an alpaca or llama breeder you need fire resistant plants that aren’t poisonous.
- 4 Have an evacuation plan and test it. Know who will show up on a moment’s notice. Where will your animals be taken? How will they be sheltered, fed and watered? Post contact information for rescue groups closest to you and have a list of citizens with trailers and the inclination to show up on a moment’s notice. Often horse associations have well trained teams of rescuers who work closely with humane societies. If, after contacting rescue people, you find they don’t know much about alpacas and llamas, attend one of their training sessions and offer to show them how to move, load and transport alpacas and llamas. For example, some horsemen tie horses in trailers, which is not done with camelids for safety reasons.
An evacuation plan should be multi-dimensional and include capturing and loading animals, exit routes and relocation sites. It should also be assumed that all the animals will need to be moved in one fell swoop. Prioritizing which animals should be taken first is worth considering. Depending on the speed of the fire, you may be forced to leave animals behind. Improvising may be necessary.
A relocation site might mean moving portable panels to a safe area where a temporary corral can be constructed. Often relocation sites are not predator proof (which means dogs as well as wild predators) or may pose a new set of risks. Relocated animals should have an on-site human attendant 24 hours a day. Know your farm’s access limitations. Often rescue trailers are large and cannot maneuver in tight places.
- 5 Halter train your animals and know how to load them. The key to fast loading is having a catch area accessible to a vehicle. Trained animals, who will halter and load easily, increase the chances for efficient transport and their survival. With animals that are untrained, knowing how to lift and carry an animal efficiently is essential. Generally alpacas can be carried by two people. Llamas that refuse to walk can be skidded to a loading area on a travois, tarp or blanket.
- 6 Beware of smoke and ash. Fire is not the only danger. Smoke can kill or cause long term respiratory problems. If the fire is close enough to rain hot ash on your farm, ignition of new fires is likely. Vigilance may help prevent additional fires.
- 7 Assume power outages will occur and plan to work around them. To protect firefighters, power companies often turn off electricity as a fire approaches a road or group of houses. The loss of power stops the use of electric pumps at the bottom of water wells. Without water stored above ground, and secondary systems to spray it to wet down a home or barns, defending your space becomes nearly impossible. At the very least, storage tanks should be outfitted with the correct fittings for a quick hook up to fire engines or pumping devices. Supply your local fire department with a map to your property showing water storage, gates and access points.
- 8 Be prepared to make your own decisions. Focus on four questions:
 - 1) Should I evacuate?
 - 2) Who will do the evacuation & and what are the safest routes.
 - 3) Is the evacuation site ready to receive the animals?
 - 4) Are the animals secure in holding areas where they can be loaded quickly?
- 9 Err on the side of caution and decisiveness. If the fire is close, assume you will evacuate unless someone in an official capacity says otherwise. Involve yourself in what’s going on. Where is the fire? How fast is it moving? What direction is the wind? Who is fighting the fire? Are exit routes operable or likely to be closed by the fire or authorities? If you can see the helmet of the pilot dropping retardants you are too close.
- 10 Phone rescue services early in the process. Fire rescue services can become overwhelmed. You want to be at the front of the line not the end. Even if you are not sure evacuation is inevitable letting rescue people know who you are, where you are, and how many animals you have can only help.