

Panel Discusses Emergency Preparedness For Livestock Operations

As the storm intensified, the sky grew darker, the driving rain stung like buckshot and a small herd of cattle outside of Bennington sought shelter behind an L-shaped windbreak. In ordinary conditions it would have been a likely place of refuge, but this storm was anything but ordinary. A deep-throated roar swallowed the deepening gloom, its deafening, pulsating howl punctuated by the brittle sounds of things smashing, of things sundering. The herd shifted as one and moaned in anguish and died there in that shadowed windbreak as a tornado sliced through the yard, shredding a steel-sided barn into jagged bits of shrapnel that eviscerated some, beheaded others.

"This is about your place," said Anthony Ruiz, livestock extension agent for the K-State Central Kansas Extension District. "It can happen to you. How do you prepare for something like that? Four key words: prepare, emergency, my place."

Preparing for such emergencies from a livestock producer's point of view was the focus of a workshop held December 10 at the K-State Salina Campus Center. Emergency Preparedness for Livestock Operations, sponsored by Amazing Grazing II, brought together a number of speakers who addressed such issues as risk management and mortality documentation, reaction and response to a high mortality infectious disease outbreak, approved mortality disposal options and the importance of pre-selected emergency disposal sites for large and small livestock farms. Guest speakers included Ruiz, Dr. Joel DeRouchey, K-State Extension Animal Science Department; Ken Powell, Kansas Department of Health and Environment's Bureau of Waste Management; Dr. Charles Barden, K-State Extension Forestry Department; and Dr. Justin Smith, DVM.

Preparing for the worst is good management, Ruiz said. "This is a business, but it's also a way of life," he said. "You can't manage what you can't measure. Preparation is what you do before the emergency."

DeRouchey agreed. "These things don't happen to us, but then they do, and we need a plan in place," he said

Those plans include having an approved pre-selected disposal site, documentation about every aspect of the livestock operation including insurance numbers, phone numbers for emergency personnel and local emergency management services, and complete inventory records on the number of livestock as well as the age of livestock, equipment, buildings and feed.

When disaster strikes, such as last year's freak blizzard in South Dakota that killed an estimated 22,000 cows and 1,400 sheep, there are four options for carcass disposal in Kansas: incineration, rendering, composting and burial. "The fifth-coyotes-isn't one of them," DeRouchey said. "We need to think of the big picture in how to handle that."

Incineration is rarely used today due to high fuel costs, he said, and there are fewer rendering services available for livestock producers. Rendering costs for large animals are also prohibitive, and isn't a perfect option for disposing of large numbers of carcasses. While burial works for small numbers of animals, on a mass scale the necessary equipment has to be on a mass scale, too. Soil types and condition, climate, location, all are important factors when burying.

Burial is also a permanent solution, Powell said. "You need to consider how the land will be used in

five, ten or more years," he said. "If you bury animals, you have a permanent burial site."

Composting is the preferred method, both Powell and DeRouchey said, though it's more challenging for beef and dairy operations. It doesn't require fancy equipment and needs only a five foot separation from groundwater and a large above-ground area that won't be used for several months. Research has shown that when done properly, a 700-pound animal will compost in three months.

In terms of mass losses, there are no easy answers, and not every option will work, Powell said. A pre-approval disposal site, however, remains one of the most important criteria for success.

"In an emergency, if you want any approval for what goes on with your farm, you better have a pre-approved site," he said. "If not, I'm going to put them where I think best. You have no say in the matter."

KDHE will assist producers in the pre-selection process, he said, including mapping out the best locations, but the program is voluntary.

In the advent of disaster, rapid response is crucial, especially during the summer months when temperatures are high. Proper disposal reduces the risk of spreading disease, prevents nuisances such as flies, vermin and scavengers, maintains air quality and controls odors, protects water quality both above and below ground, and improves the public's confidence and perception, Powell said.

Despite the worst-case scenario of the Bennington cows, windbreaks are ideal for protecting cattle from winter's worst ravages, Barden said.

"A well designed windbreak allows cattle to need less energy and less food," he said. "The bigger the storm, the bigger the difference a windbreak will have. But poorly-planned windbreaks can worsen the problem. There's a right way to designing them, and a wrong way."

Barden outlined options for windbreaks, including proper species for planting—a mix of cedars and hardwoods is best, with low shrubbery on the lee side of the wind-plant density, aesthetics and grants that are available for Kansas producers. The Kansas Forest Service can assist farmers and ranchers with proper placement and other concerns, he said.

A windbreak isn't a quick fix, he added, but more of a long-term solution. "The best time to plant a windbreak was 15 years ago," he said. "The second best time is now."

And the best time to prepare for emergencies is now, Ruiz said.

"It's your place," he said. "You're responsible for it. Everything that does or does not occur depends on your management."

Even the unthinkable. Especially the unthinkable.

Video of the workshop presentations can be viewed at
http://www.asi.k-state.edu/species/beef/Emergency_preparedness.html

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For more information about Amazing Grazing II and upcoming workshops, visit the Web site AmazingGrazingKansas.com