



# EVACUATE ANIMALS OR HAVE PLAN TO PROTECT THEM WHEN WILDFIRE LOOMS?

*Scott Cotton*

**D**eciding whether to evacuate animals in case of a wildfire or to “defend in place” is based on time, capability, and access during any specific incident.

Discuss the issues using the principle “an injured rescuer saves no animals” so the owner’s safety and function is protected first to allow them to work on behalf of the animals. Remember, if you are injured, then the animals are without help anyway!

## **If Evacuating Animals**

Here are mandatory conditions that must be met before initiating evacuation:

- There must be enough time to safely access, move animals, and leave the site. Plan for twice as long as expected to compensate for challenges finding, capturing, and loading animals and the potential for fire movement to advance.
- Have a predetermined location to take your animals.
- Understand that almost all animal species become panicky and demonstrate different handling characteristics when they smell smoke.
- There must be suitable and safe equipment to move animals in a reasonable amount of time and sufficient help to use this equipment.

*Horses graze near a burned area.*



## Wildfire speeds

Wildfire is one of the most common types of disaster in Wyoming and can happen in most seasons. Wildfire incidents increase during droughts, high wind, dry lightning storms, and with plentiful dried vegetation left over from wet years.

The movement and behavior of wildfire can be difficult to predict even for experienced wildland firefighters. Research shows wildfires moving with the wind travel 3 to 12 miles per hour but can move as fast as 33 mph. Embers and “crowns” (burning segments of trees and brush) can start new fires as far as 2 miles in advance of the original fire line.

- Ensure there is approved access to the site by the fire command team or agriculture/animal branch of the command team. (Contact with this team can provide updates on fire behavior, suitable routes and, occasionally, assistance moving animals).

If all of the conditions cannot be met, then refer your animal needs to the incident team via the assigned public information officer, local fire chief, or local sheriff for assistance.

### Defending in Place

“Defending in place” is a fire-fighting concept in which evacuating animals is not possible, so measures are taken to help them survive a fire.

- Pay close attention each year to precipitation, storm patterns, and vegetation residue to determine if there is increased wildfire risk.
- Create firebreaks on the property perimeter and between pastures and buildings. Establish roads (30-plus feet wide) or areas of low-growing or mowed vegetation where fire will slow due to lack of fuel.
- If possible, have wet areas between some of your pastures that can serve as fire barriers.
- Create a “sanctuary” such as a large corral with no vegetation where animals are held when fire approaches. (Steel fences are recommended for fire resistance.)
- Do not shelter animals in buildings because these can easily catch fire from floating embers.
- If there is no “safe” zone on the property, open inner gates, mark your address or phone number on animals with livestock marker, remove all harnesses and halters and let the animals loose on your property. This allows animals to follow normal self-preservation

habits to avoid fire, prevents them from getting snagged on fences or panels (reducing injuries), and allows authorities to identify the animals if found in different locations. Firefighters may turn your animals loose to protect them from immediate danger.

Animals have innate, self-preservation reactions to fire but may become confused when smoke overwhelms them. In addition, they have no idea where extended fire risk may be – they just sense what is close to them. Both animals and people can be confused by wildfires, and “normal” behavior cannot be expected.

### After the Fire

There are crucial steps to take upon returning to an area where animals were defended in place.

- Make sure they have clean water and check for obvious injuries and burns (treat).

### FOR MORE WILDFIRE PREPARATION INFORMATION

Read more about wildfires with Barnyards and Backyards’ publication “Living with Wildfire in Wyoming.” <http://bit.ly/wildfirebeware>



*If you have questions about livestock evacuation techniques and practices for wildfires, floods, disease outbreak, and other disasters, please contact **Scott Cotton**, University of Wyoming Extension area educator/Extension Disaster Education Delegate, at (307) 235-9400 or [scotton1@uwyo.edu](mailto:scotton1@uwyo.edu).*

- Move them to an unburned area to get already heated feet off of heated soil.
- Wash out eyes, noses, mouths, and then bath them gently to cool them down.
- Get professional veterinary care if needed.
- Watch for extended fire impacts such as respiratory distress, sore feet, and stress effects.

When flames approach, the decision to evacuate or defend animals in place is never easy, but with fire-breaks and proper planning, decisions become simpler. Remember – you never really know what it will take to do either unless you practice it, which, in fire lingo, is “exercising a plan.”

### WILDFIRE BY THE NUMBERS

- 105,000 wildfires burn four to five million acres each year, usually in the West or Southwest United States, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the National Wildfire Coordinating Group.
- The number of wildfires increased by 44,524 (above the 105,000) and scorched over 7.7 million acres in the United States during summer 2012. Most occurred in the West with areas within 90 miles of Wyoming such as western Nebraska and South Dakota losing almost 400,000 acres.
- Most years, Wyoming has about 60 forest fires and almost 1,000 grassland fires. A particularly bad year was 2002 with over 3,900 wildfires in Wyoming and Colorado. Larger wildfires are usually tracked and documented at [www.incivweb.org](http://www.incivweb.org) maintained by the National Wildfire Coordinating Group.
- An average wildfire in the West is 173 to 523 acres.
- Most rural western United States counties experience over 40 wildfires a year.