

Should you turn horses loose with a rapidly moving approaching fire?

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Given the events unfolding throughout California and the many horses residing within the state, the risk to horses from the extraordinary fire activity is significant. There has been a massive expansion of awareness of the need to evacuate early with animals including horses, public service announcements, and numerous web sites with resources providing specific guidance on how to prepare ahead of time and how to evacuate safely. Yet, as we all know now, fire behavior has changed significantly due to many factors and challenged our most experienced and professional fire response entities to rethink their approaches based on the new normal of rapidly spreading fire behavior.

In the thirty years that I have been involved with disaster response with a focus on the equine, I have personally seen examples of poor outcomes for horses because of evacuation failures. I have attended numerous after-action reviews, and listened to first responders and horse owners relay personal experiences with the issue of horses confined and impending fire. We all have seen the videos of the racing training facility fire and the attempts to save horses lives by opening stalls with the barn rooftops on fire and letting the horses loose. I am aware of an individual who suffered severe brain injury during trailer loading while attempting evacuation of horses with impending fire visible. I have witnessed the remains of horses confined in pens or stalls and burned to death. I have observed one horse turned loose and hit by vehicles and I am aware of many horses injured during flight from a fire while loose.

The following is an attempt to aid the awareness of those faced with the dilemma of no ability to catch, load or lead horses from fires immediately adjacent or completely on top of a barn or field containing the horses.

From the horse's welfare point of view

What are the three most effective methods for preventing injury to a horse during a wildland fire?

- 1) Evacuate early
- 2) Evacuate early
- 3) Evacuate early

What are the two main options for horses in wildland fires?

- 1) Shelter in Place
- 2) Evacuate

What circumstances impede the most desirable approach - evacuation of horses?

- 1) Lack of ability to capture horses
- 2) Horses that are not trained to load
- 3) Lack of trailer space for horses on the premises
- 4) Lack of halters and ropes
- 5) Young horses, mares and foals, and stallions which complicate handling and loading
- 6) Impending convergence of flame, heat, and smoke, making physical presence unsafe for humans
- 7) Lack of enough people with skills to catch, halter and lead the number or kinds of horses within the facility at risk in a time frame that prevents fire from engulfing the facility.
- 8) Panic by those at the facility when the fire is not an immediate threat

Situation: When a horse facility is in immediate and eminent consumption by fire with no defensible space or personnel, will opening field and pasture gates, stalls doors and other restraining obstacles allow the horse to run and potentially escape the flames?

Yes, and be aware of the following:

- If the safe area the horse has exited from is a barn or other facility familiar to the horse, they may attempt to return into that facility even when there are flames present. It's not a myth. So, if the decision is to turn horses loose, take precautions to prevent them from reentering the danger area.
- If horses are turned loose, immediately notify via 911 of loose horses so first responders in the area can be alerted.
- Attempt to create a secondary capture or confinement area and direct horses in that direction if possible.
- Put out a call for horse groups to converge at a distant location but close to where loose horses are and to bring halters, grain buckets to facilitate catching horses, and trailers. Most horses, even under stress, will key on the sound of grain in a bucket. I have seen horses attempted to be caught with ropes and halters unsuccessfully and immediately approach a handler standing still with grain and a bucket.

How to prevent the need to turn horses loose under direct and immediate threat of injury by fire?

- Know your county's equine evacuation plan
- Become an active member of the local evacuation and disaster response team
- Train horses to load, practice evacuation prior to fire season, and develop a phone tree for other horse people with trailers.

What other factors prevent getting resources to catch, load and haul horses from harm's way with impending fire?

- 1) Inability of volunteers with trailers to enter the area currently under evacuation orders even with the immediate risk being low. Roadblocks by government authorities with orders to allow no one in can prevent the needed evacuation resources from getting to the facilities at risk in a timely fashion.

- 2) Lack of an organized evacuation team with phone code to show roadblock personnel for safe entry into early evacuation authorized by the county office of emergency services working with animal control (not many looters are towing horse trailers and wearing cowboy hats).
- 3) There are not enough animal control officers to be present and assist all equine evacuations or escort haulers into the area under early evacuation orders.

Suggestions and additional comments:

- Have a buddy system and a plan for evacuation and practice that plan before an incident occurs.
- Identify your horses before being evacuated or turning them loose.
 - Tags, collars, paint, phone number written on hooves in sharpie pen
 - Take a smart phone picture of the horse(s)
- Evacuate early, even if you do not know where you will take the horses. Get them out of harm's way. The roads may close and you will NOT be allowed access if you wait too long. Walking (leading horses on lead rope and halter) may be your only method.
- Try not to separate horses if moving them as a group leading by rope and halter.
- Keep in mind that horses are not afraid of the smoke alone. They are afraid of the noise and wind created by nearby fires.
- Horses become stressed if the people evacuating them are stressed and panicked.

When can you shelter in place?

- If it is the only option and there's no way out
- Clear at least 100 feet in all directions.
- If you would not be safe sheltering in place, your horse won't be either.
- Attempt to obtain a fire suppression team to defend the space or make an assessment if it is defensible. If not, begin evacuation.
- Do not leave horses in the barn.
- Remove horses from all nearby structures.
- Provide food and water if you have time.
- Turn on a generator for power and run sprinklers in fields where horses may be sheltered if possible.
- I.D. the horses:
 - Paint, tag, collar, phone number written on hooves in sharpie pen, cattle ear tags with info placed in mane, etc. (have something in the barn for this)
- Remove blankets.
- If possible, hose off horses prior to placing in large field.

What can go wrong when you turn horses loose?

- First responder entry could be impeded due to loose horses on driveways or roadways.
- Horses could be hit by responding vehicles and suffer broken legs or permanent injuries.
- A first responder or civilian could collide with a loose horse that then rolls into the windshield and injures or kills individuals.
- First responders or citizens on the ground could be run over by loose horses stampeding.

- Horses could travel further distances and enter major roadways with traffic.
- Horses could suffer musculoskeletal trauma including broken limbs, head trauma, falling trauma from running on slippery road footing, or kick other loose horses, run through fences, barbed wire etc., and obtain flight related injuries.
- Horses with halters (especially nylon) could get facial injuries from excessive heat, but they are easier to catch if wearing a halter.
- Horse could hook their halters on fences, posts, and other objects.
- Horses with no halters could flee those attempting to catch them with ropes and cause injury to others or themselves. Ideally, leather breakable halters or a neck broodmare ID type collar is preferable.

Here are a few **Do's and Don'ts** from a **Guidelines on Loose Livestock in Public Places** that I authored that can be found in complete form [here](#):

- ✓ **DO** restrict the area where the loose animals can travel by immediately closing perimeter gates as soon as possible. The first objective is to contain the animals within some zone or area.
- ✓ **DO** direct loose animals to a confined fenced area (pre-identified) and then wait for them to calm down. When personnel are prepared and the necessary equipment has been obtained, move the animal to a smaller area for loading into a transport vehicle.
- ✓ **DO** move the animals quietly and slowly using the fewest number of people possible. Animals will become agitated if approached by a large group of people.
- ✓ **DO** allow time for the animals to settle down and then move them when all conditions are suitable.
- ✓ **DO** attempt to keep loose animals in a group; it is a natural behavior for most livestock to stay in a group.
- ⊘ **DON'T** allow too many people to get involved or interfere with capture operations as it may subject people to risks and injuries.
- ⊘ **DON'T** be in a hurry. Stay calm, move slowly, and do not encourage the animal to flee by chasing them like a predator.
- ⊘ **DON'T** turn on sirens or lights if approaching loose horses or livestock.
- ⊘ **DON'T** chase cattle or horses or try to move them with cars or vehicles.
- ⊘ **DON'T** yell or attempt to act too quickly, which can further scare the loose animal

Conclusion

In my personal opinion, I do believe there are humane grounds for opening confinement areas when intense fire is present and is about to engulf a facility. In those circumstances, if horses are trapped and will surely die if not allowed freedom of movement, releasing them is appropriate. Realize the risk. Make your own decision considering all the factors described above. Accept that nearly everything about a wildland fire carries some degree of risk, even loading horses during early evacuation, which is the method of choice.