

Veteran trainer shares preparation, evacuation & shelter-in-place strategies.

by Susan Friend LeTourneur

It is inevitable. If you live in the foothills or mountains in Southern California, at one time or another, you will be faced with fire. One can only hope it is not on a windy night and you have plenty of time to implement your evacuation plan. We have a good one (see below for more details).



If only we had the time. I do not recommend having to shelter in place when a fire is approaching your property; however, sometimes, as in our case, we had no choice. Our home and business, Goldspirit Farm, are in Kagel Canyon, less than two miles from the start of December's Creek Fire. We could first smell the fire at 3:44 a.m.

Looking out my front door, the sky to the east was orange. I knew the fire was close. And, since there is nothing but chaparral covered hills to the east of our property; the fire could travel fast. We had to move fast as well!

February 2018 - Lessons From The Fire

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Wednesday, 31 January 2018 21:41

I made a few calls to get someone to take our cats, and to get a one-call out to our entire community to warn them of the fire. Our first evacuees were our nine house cats. In less than 20 minutes, we had our nine cats in their carriers and in the car which we parked in the middle of the field waiting for a friend to retrieve them.

It was now 4:18 a.m. The fire travelled about two miles in that time, and our hills were already on fire! Flames were within 100 feet of the barns. The air was filled with smoke, ash and embers. It was difficult to see and breathe. We had little time; rather, we were already out of time. The fire was here.

The only option was to move as fast as possible to get horses out of the main barn and the pipe corrals before they ignited on fire. The only place to put them was in the two large turn-outs. The first concern I had was whether or not they would get along. But I had to surrender to the idea that a kicked horse was better than a burned horse.



First, I had to be able to see and breathe. One of the things we are changing at our place is to have a stay-in-place fire bag, with everything we need in one place. I had to go to the vet box for a mask, which I could not find in the dark, so I used a cotton spider bandage instead. I had to go to the clipper box to retrieve goggles, and then to my office for gloves.

Because we have a good barn design, do great vegetation clearance and were lucky, I got our 20 horses out of the barns and into the turn-outs safely. As I was taking horses from the pipe corrals, the shavings were catching on fire. A neighbor showed up and helped me move the remainder of the horses before the pipe corral was engulfed in flames. The wonderful firemen then arrived and put out the fire, but the shavings kept smoldering and burning for hours even after hundreds of gallons of water were put on them.

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By 5:30 a.m., the fire had swept through our property. The hills were black, some of our cross-country jumps were burned; others disintegrated. When the smoke cleared, my home was still standing. We survived another fire; our second in less than 10 years.

While I owe a lot to luck, we cannot put aside the work we do to keep our property safe and ready for a fire. As the owner and manager of Goldspirit Farm, preparing for fire is second nature to me and my husband.

Fire preparedness starts with vegetation clearance and covers so much more. It is important to first give your horses a defensible space. That means, clearing all vegetation for at least the first 50 feet and thinning the vegetation for the next 150 to 200 feet.

Here are some other things we do to be fire ready:

- We keep the facility itself clean and neat. We use a blower around the barn every day to remove excess dust, leaves, hay and shavings. The point is not just to have a clean barn, but to remove any extra fuel that can ignite a fire.
- There are no buckets or tack trunks in the barn aisles; those quickly get in the way when you cannot see and you need to evacuate horses. We have hoses at each end of the barn and in the middle, which we pull out and have ready to put our spot fires.
- We keep our evacuation plan on a bulletin board in the barn. This plan has exit routes, our address (you need it when you call 911) and whom to call to help evacuate horses.
- We keep a landline that does not need electricity so we can use it in a power outage.
- We keep the trailer in working order, and hooked up during fire season.
- The next step in fire preparedness is to have a plan for evacuation and a plan B.



Experience-Based Advice

1. Have an evacuation plan: know where you are going and who is taking you there. Keep a phone list of whom to call to help you haul and load horses. We have our evacuation list next to each phone at the barn. In our community we use the one-call system, where everyone is on this system and we make one call that goes to everyone. We are going to look into doing that for our clients. There is not time to make calls when you need to evacuate quickly. In this fire, I phoned one person and said get the word out. She used an email I sent with everyone on the list and in minutes, everyone knew what was going on.

2. Before you evacuate: Call 911. Tell them you need help and how many horses you need to evacuate. Open all your gates and turn on every light at your facility. It gets very dark and smoky during a fire, even in daytime, and you want the firemen to see you. Halter the horses in their stalls and leave the lead ropes over the doors. Each horse in our barn has a halter with a nametag and an ID tag. The ID tag is a small reflective dog tag; on one side it has a label with the barn name, address and telephone number. This is an inexpensive way to identify your horses in case of fire or other emergency that causes an evacuation. When you do evacuate, load the trucks with hay and buckets as you load the horses.

3. If you have dogs or cats, you need to have a leash for each dog and a carrier for each cat. These items should be kept in an easily accessible place. Leash the dogs and keep them contained in a stall or office until you are ready to evacuate them. Put the cats in their carriers in a car and park the car where it is not next to a building, nor in the way of access for the firemen.

4. Have an evacuation kit. I keep mine in my trailer, and it includes a feeding list of all the horses; duct tape; pen and paper; wire cutters; knife; 2 headlamps with working batteries; 2 flashlights with working batteries; 2 walkie-talkies; goggles and breathing mask; gloves and hat; eye drops and lip balm; small first aid kit; crescent wrench; multi-screwdriver; a jacket; labels with your information for stalls, buckets, rakes, etc.; a phone list of boarders and students; a copy of the evacuation list and map; business cards; a note to get cellphone and charger; and finally a note to remind myself: I can do this!

5.



Have an emergency bag (a backpack works great) with the following: cell phone, walkie-talkies, pen and paper, a flashlight and a headlamp, a knife, gloves, goggles, bandana, hat, face mask, and lip balm. Keep this bag by your bed so you have it when you go to save your horses. When you get dressed, remember to wear only cotton clothes, dress in layers and

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wear things with pockets.

Even if you do not live in a high fire danger area, barns catch fire, houses burn. Being prepared did more than give us a fighting chance; it allowed us to remain calm and on-purpose to get the job of saving our horses done.

Author Susan Friend LeTourneur owns Goldspirit Farm, an eventing and dressage boarding and training facility in Los Angeles County's Lake View Terrace. She can be reached at 818-834-1272 or via www.goldspiritfarm.com.