

# MONTANA DRAFT HORSE AND MULE ASSOCIATION

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# FIRE!!!!

Now that's a statement that you don't want to hear. Two months after Lesley and I were married, we came home after being away from our little first home (a 8X40 ft. trailer) for only 30 minutes to find it burning to the ground. My daughter opened the basement door in her home to find the whole basement on fire—and eventually the whole house.

Worse than that was a barn fire. When I was freshly out of vet school we took a job in Great Falls. The clinic was on the north edge of town looking down on the river and open prairie and wheat fields to the north. About 2 miles north was a barn with corrals attached with a lot of horses boarded there.

One morning I looked north and saw lots of fire and smoke coming from that spot. I raced down there and found the whole facility locked up with padlocks on every gate and stall door. There was no one around. I had already called 911 and the local volunteer fire department that was stationed right across from our clinic was on its way. Well, no one came and horses were frantic and dying. I had a big axe in my truck so I started chopping the rails down on the pens. With all the adrenaline a body can muster, I chopped those 6 inch rails one by one. As I got the second rail chopped, the horses would jump over the rest of them, sometimes even with me standing in the way.

The sad part was that a bunch of horses (I have forgotten how many) burned to death. A few others were burned over much of their bodies and had to be euthanized. One owner could not be found for permission to euthanize his horse and I treated the horse for 3 days, trying to ease the horrible pain it had before getting permission to euthanize. Second sad part—the fire department didn't get there forever because the truck ran out of gas about 200 yards away from the fire station!!!!

This summer, with all the fires in Montana and everywhere else, there was a report of another barn fire/forest fire killing 20 horses trapped in the barn. TRAGIC.

So while we are sitting inside waiting out the single digit weather to change to anything warmer, it might be a good time to think about emergency situations and what to do. Our trailer fire burned everything we owned, but we were poor college students and there was very little to lose. Now we have lots of "things" that 49 years have accumulated and most important is we have the lives of our horses to take care of as well.

I would list FIRE as the number one threat. Of course, it varies where you live and your circumstance. I was talking to Robin Williams, a new MDHMA member, who lives near Bozeman. There was a fire there and she was worried that she might be in its path. Fortunately, it didn't reach her but what can be done with her 4 horses or my 14 when the disaster is coming?

First: have a plan for the worst scenario. The horses need to be moved and moved now. But where to? It can't be a neighbor as the neighbor will have the same fire threat. It needs to be done as early as possible because you will have other things to worry about as it gets closer. So, Robin and I schemed our plan. I live 2 ½ hours from her. The same fire would not be in my neighborhood, so if I got a call from Robin, I would hitch up my trailer and head to Bozeman. I might meet her half way or all the way to Bozeman. I probably couldn't drive to her home because of the emergency. We would transfer horses to my trailer and let her go home with her trailer to load it with her own valuables if it got to that. Robin would be free to worry about what is happening in her immediate area while I took care of her horses for as long as it takes. That is one giant worry off Robin's mind while she deals with the house and fire.

So the best thing is to know who you might call to send your horses off to and out of trouble.

From my experience, I would say NEVER lock your horses in to a barn or corral. If you are worried about theft, then put up cameras for security and post the area with signs saying the cameras are there. Having a horse stolen is better (only a little better) than having one burn to death.

If you see a fire, turn the horses loose and open all gates so they can roam far and wide to escape the fire. They can always be rounded up later. Don't ever think that a barn is a safe place for a horse in a fire. If it doesn't burn, you still have the smoke that kills as well-----and it will most likely burn. Everything in a barn is flammable and sparks from a passing fire will very likely turn it into an inferno.

Sometimes a local fairgrounds can be used to house horses but it may also be in the fire danger area. It may be loaded with horses and have no one to watch over them. Turning them over to a friend is a much better solution.

You need to know that if the fire rages through your area, burns all your hay or fields, and you are desperate for what to do, call a member of the MDHMA board or any other member and let us see what we can do to help. That is what the MDHMA is all about, helping those that share a love of driving and horses.

That leaves earthquakes, mud slides, tornados, floods, and drive by shootings, all of which CAN happen, but are pretty rare in our state. Drought might be a more frequent emergency, which is kind of normal for Montana, depending on where you live. If Robin's barn had burned to the ground, I can see the next MDHMA meeting being without horses and with hammers and saws to get her going again. It's what we do.

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