

# Wildfire Preparation Strategies for Commercial Ranches

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## Introduction

Wildfire preparations are much more complicated for commercial livestock operations. In addition to creating a fire-safe space around homes, these ranching businesses must also protect livestock and ranch infrastructure. Many ranches have livestock in multiple locations, and many of these leased pastures are simply pastures; there is no landlord or caretaker on site. Physical addresses for these leased ranches may not be readily apparent. Often, the number of livestock at a particular site may be more than can be easily evacuated in case of wildfire. Finally, access during a fire may be difficult due to law enforcement road blocks and priority for fire equipment. **This publication provides an overview of a few key wildfire preparation and planning strategies for commercial livestock producers.**



## Assessing the Threat

What is at risk in your operation? Do you have livestock in multiple locations? What is access like? At a minimum, your wildfire preparation efforts should address the following:

1. Create defensible space around home(s), barns and other infrastructure.
2. Are there any access issues at any location where you have livestock? Single lane roads can be especially problematic. Do you have alternative access points?
3. If you rely on dry forage for fall grazing, are there steps you can take to protect this forage from fire?
4. Are there potential animal health issues associated with smoke and other indirect wildfire impacts?

## Developing and Implementing a Wildfire Plan

Your ranch wildfire plan should have several components:

1. **Protecting buildings, infrastructure and information:** Remove flammable vegetation from within 100 feet of houses and other buildings. This should also include other critical infrastructure like propane tanks, wells, equipment sheds, barns and corrals. Also be sure you have protected critical legal documents and insurance information. Check CalFire's suggestions for putting together an emergency supply kit (<http://www.readyforwildfire.org/Emergency-Supply-Kit/>).
2. **Protecting forage:** Many ranchers stock their operations conservatively to ensure a supply of fall forage for livestock. Consider creating fuel breaks to protect this forage from wildfire. Disking or grading around the perimeter of pastures, or at least adjacent to potential ignition sources, can reduce the threat. Another alternative is to use targeted grazing adjacent to roads or pasture boundaries - this can reduce the fuel load and

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slow a fire down. The width of any fuel break depends on the fuel type, topography/slope, and potential flame lengths that a fire might generate.

3. **Protecting livestock:** Try to plan ahead for how you might move livestock out of harm's way in the event of a wildfire. However, many operations have too many animals to evacuate on short notice; leaving animals in pasture (or "sheltering in place") might be the best option. If you need to leave animals in place, be sure they have enough feed and water for several days. Will the livestock have water if the power goes out? Be sure to take down temporary fences or other hazards that may injure livestock as the fire moves through the property. Prepare for any post-fire health problems (like respiratory infections or other injuries) as well.
4. **Water supply:** Water is critical for protecting your properties and for keeping livestock healthy. Do you have adequate water supplies for wetting down your buildings and facilities, or for directly fighting fire? If you have to pump water, do you have a backup system in case you lose power? Can you provide stock water if the power goes out? Consider investing in a backup generator and/or additional water storage.
5. **Escape routes:** Ideally, you should have at least two routes in and out of your ranch properties. In addition, try to think about at least two alternatives for moving livestock to safety in the event of a fire. This means loading and unloading facilities, a plan for gathering livestock, and a clear understanding of the road system near your pastures. Narrow roads can be problematic for navigating with stock trailers, especially when fire equipment is also inbound.
6. **Backup:** Obviously, many ranchers can't be on hand 24 hours a day, seven days a week to respond to a fast-moving fire (especially when livestock are grazing on multiple properties). Consider working with friends, neighbors or colleagues to have a backup plan to evacuate or otherwise protect your livestock. Consider meeting with your neighbors to go over key livestock facilities, evacuation plans and access routes. Be sure to check in with these backup resources in the event of fire.
7. **Communication plans:** Do you have phone numbers for the other ranchers in your area? Do you know who runs the cows or sheep next door? During fire season, many ranchers text or call neighbors when they see smoke. Consider formalizing these calling trees.
8. **Situational awareness:** Be aware of your surroundings during fire season. Watch for smoke, especially when you hear fire equipment or aircraft. Carry a shovel or other fire tool and 5 gallons of water in your pickup. Pay attention to where ranch visitors park – a catalytic converter on dry grass can be disastrous. Check local news websites or alert services (like [www.yubanet.com](http://www.yubanet.com)).

## Writing Down your Plan

Even for ranching operations with few or no employees, writing down your plan can help others (spouses, neighbors, etc.) know what to do and who to contact in case of fire. A written plan should include the locations where livestock are grazing (which suggests this plan needs to be updated as livestock are moved). Location information should include a physical address and/or map, along with the number and class of animals on site. A written plan should also include a description of potential evacuation routes (including locations of loading facilities). Are there safe zones (like dry lots or irrigated pastures) on the property or nearby where animals could be moved if evacuation isn't possible? Is there an onsite caretaker or neighbor you can call in case of emergency? Are there other ranchers who could help you? What are the numbers of livestock haulers who might be available? A template for this plan is included in this publication.

Share a copy of this plan with other people in your operation – your spouse, your partners, and/or your employees, at a minimum. Consider sharing this plan with your landlords, as well. Since animal control is often involved in

emergency situations, consider providing a copy (or at least a list of locations where you have livestock) to your local fire, animal control, and law enforcement agencies.

For more information:

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## RANCH FIRE PREPARATION PLAN

Ranch Name and Contact Information:					
This plan was created on:					
<i>Livestock (species, class, #, stage of production)</i>	<i>Location (include on/off dates)</i>	<i>Safe Zones / Shelter in Place Options</i>	<i>Evacuation Routes # of Loads</i>	<i>Critical Considerations (stock water, guard animals, etc.)</i>	<i>Emergency Contact(s)</i>

Other Local Rancher/Livestock Hauler Contacts: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Other Emergency Contacts: Animal Control Dispatch \_\_\_\_\_  
California Highway Patrol \_\_\_\_\_  
CalFire/Other Fire \_\_\_\_\_  
County Sheriff \_\_\_\_\_

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