

Safety Watch: Take precautions to avoid farm fires this winter

By Brandi Janssen, 2015

It seems everyone has a story when it comes to farm fires. This winter, Iowa's Center for Agricultural Safety and Health (I-CASH) will focus on farm fire prevention as part of our seasonal campaign series. As we've been developing the message, stories of personal experiences with farm fires have come out of the woodwork.

The one that sticks with me comes from a coworker. It started with a spark from an electric fence that ignited loose hay in an old wooden outbuilding.

My coworker's father attempted to extinguish the small fire by stomping on it and with a bucket of water. Even though strong winds were spreading the fire, and the coworker was telling her father to leave the building, he continued to try to extinguish the fire on his own.

This was in the years before cell phones, so she had to leave the building to call the fire department and was told to wait by the end of the farm lane to direct the fire truck to the right location. At the same time, she needed to return to the fire to check on her father. She recalled the panic and confusion, trying to relay messages and directions to family members and the fire department.

The risk of fire increases in both homes and outbuildings during the winter months. In urban areas, most fires are a result of cooking. In rural communities, heating is a larger source of risk, in houses and other buildings.

Barn fires can be especially fast and devastating. A barn can fill with smoke in three to four minutes and be completely engulfed in flames within five. Flammable dusts, old wood and dry hay can serve as tinder for flames, causing even small fires to quickly spread. The good news is most fires are preventable, and there are a number of steps you can take to reduce the risk of a fire on your farm this winter.

Misuse of heaters is often the cause of farm fires.

Only use heaters, fans and heat lamps that are designed for industrial use. Risk of fire is extremely high when residential products are used in farm buildings. Limit all welding, cutting, generator use and equipment fueling to well-ventilated areas.

Tips for Prevention

- Good housekeeping and maintenance are excellent prevention tools. Keep buildings tidy, electrical systems in good working order and equipment maintained.
- Plan ahead for a fire event and share the plan with your family, neighbors and the fire department.
- Know the 911 address for any buildings on your property not associated with a residence.
- Install at least one wall-mounted 10-pound ABC extinguisher in all outbuildings
- Check with your insurance agent about possible reduced premiums if you take precautions for fire prevention.

Good housekeeping serves as an all-around injury prevention strategy and it helps reduce the risk of fire as well. Cobwebs and dust can be combustible, as are brush and weeds that surround buildings. Keep all compressed air cylinders and valves in good repair and check emergency generators periodically to ensure they are in good working order.

Faulty electrical work also causes fires in Iowa every year. Make sure all your electrical upgrades are completed or inspected by a licensed electrician. Use extension cords sparingly and run heaters, lights and radios only when someone is in the building. Keep areas around electrical panels clear and make sure all circuits are labeled.

Machinery fires can be highly destructive if they ignite in a building. Always check fuel lines during regular maintenance to ensure there are no leaks and keep exhaust systems in good condition to avoid sparks.

While prevention is key, it's also important to have a plan in the event a fire occurs. You will only have a few minutes to act, so preparation is important for the whole family. Review the plan with family members as well as your local fire department. Invite the fire department to tour your property and provide them with a map that identifies power and water sources. Think ahead about evacuating livestock and identify a corral or other enclosure to hold them during and after a fire.

Ensure the farm yard and road areas are clear so a fire truck can access any building on your property and keep wells in good working order so you have a water source available.

As part of the winter campaign, I-CASH is distributing fire prevention packets to regional Extension offices across the state. Stop in to pick one up or go to our website at www.i-cash.org and we'll send you one while supplies last. We've included templates for developing an emergency plan, signs for your outbuildings and discount coupons to purchase fire safety equipment from Gempler's.

Fortunately, my coworker's story had a mostly happy ending. Although the building was completely lost, no one was hurt. They had insurance coverage to offset the damage. Unfortunately, not all farm fires can be extinguished without loss of livestock or life.

It's worth taking the time to enact some basic fire prevention strategies on your farm.

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