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Don't rely on luck to get through next emergency

By Brandi Janssen

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Shay Foulk, a risk management safety consultant with Ag View Solutions, speaks at the recent Midwest Rural and Agricultural Safety and Health (MRASH) Conference in Marshalltown, Iowa.

Photo courtesy Brandi Janssen

If you want an inspirational quote, the topic of preparedness provides lots of options.

The Boy Scouts have always implored us to “be prepared,” and perhaps they were inspired by Benjamin Franklin’s warning that “by failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail.”



Or, if you like a more specific example, financial planner Howard Ruff pointed out that “it wasn’t raining when Noah built the ark.”

Preparing for the unexpected is something we all know we should do, and there are real benefits to developing emergency preparedness plans, especially for your farm. Unfortunately, sometimes these plans are a lot more complicated to develop than stating a simple phrase. Shay Foulk is a risk management safety consultant with Ag View Solutions, a firm that provides farm emergency response planning services.

“Farm emergency response planning, when done right, is very involved and very intensive,” Foulk says.

As a result, he points out, farmers often do not think about developing a plan until well after an incident has occurred on the farm — kind of like building the ark in the rain.

The first step is to consider what types of emergencies you might have to plan for, and this may vary somewhat by region.

Any farm should have a plan for a catastrophic farm accident, such as a tractor rollover or grain engulfment. But you should also have plans in place for various natural disasters. Here in the Midwest, floods, severe snowstorms, fires and tornadoes are the most likely scenarios.

“The biggest challenge is that you don’t know what you don’t know, so you need to ask the right questions,” Foulk says.

For example, in case of a fire, does everyone know where to meet up? Are exits clearly labeled? Who is in charge if this occurs? Simply listing these questions is a good starting point to generate the next steps, such as creating an emergency contact list and thinking through how to help emergency responders find your farm and respond quickly.

For nearly any emergency response plan, a farm map is a critical tool. The map can serve two primary purposes: One, to identify entrances and GPS coordinates for fields to help emergency services reach you as quickly as possible and, two, to identify hazard

areas, such as chemical storage, electrical sources, overhead powerlines and others so that they can be contained or avoided as necessary.

The process of creating the map will also help you think through what you will have to do in different situations. Marking gates can help identify escape routes for livestock; indicating locations of generators or other back-up power sources can help employees access them in the case of a power outage.

In addition, there are a number of online tools, such as My Smart 911, that can help you link your farm data to local emergency services.

“Farmers may feel overwhelmed or not confident enough to develop farm blueprints, coordinate with local emergency responders, and then organize and upload information to an online service,” Foulk says. “The prospect is daunting, but once the ball is rolling, things really fall together and the time spent is more than worth it.”

In addition to farm maps, University of Minnesota Extension recommends making several lists. One should be of all farm inventory, including livestock, crop types and machinery. Another list should be for emergency contacts that include family members and employees, your vet, insurance agent and farm suppliers.

Finally, develop action steps for different potential emergencies. There will be different steps depending on whether you will evacuate, in the case of a flood, or shelter in place during a severe snowstorm. In either scenario, go back to your map to identify escape routes and alternate road access points, as well as safe places to shelter and backup power and fuel sources.

Foulk points out any response plan needs to be easy to implement. He recommends “starting small and rudimentary if necessary, then use your momentum to continue to improve and implement the plan.”

You want to develop a plan that is effective, practical to use and financially achievable.

Finally, don't forget to communicate about the plan throughout the process of developing it and after it is complete. All family members and employees should be involved throughout the process and know what their role will be if you have to use it.

Review the plan periodically as your farm infrastructure changes.

“If farm emergency response planning can prevent just one injury, save just one life, or stop just one farm accident, then it is all worth it,” Foulk says.

He recognizes that envisioning future events, especially disasters that sometimes seem unimaginable, can be hard to do.

But, he says, the best “tangible measurement is if an emergency response plan is in place and works effectively in the event of an emergency.”

Or, to quote author Joe Poyer, “Thorough preparation makes its own luck.”

For more emergency planning resources, visit www.i-cash.com or contact Shay Foulk at agronguy@gmail.com or by phone at 319-464-5708.

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