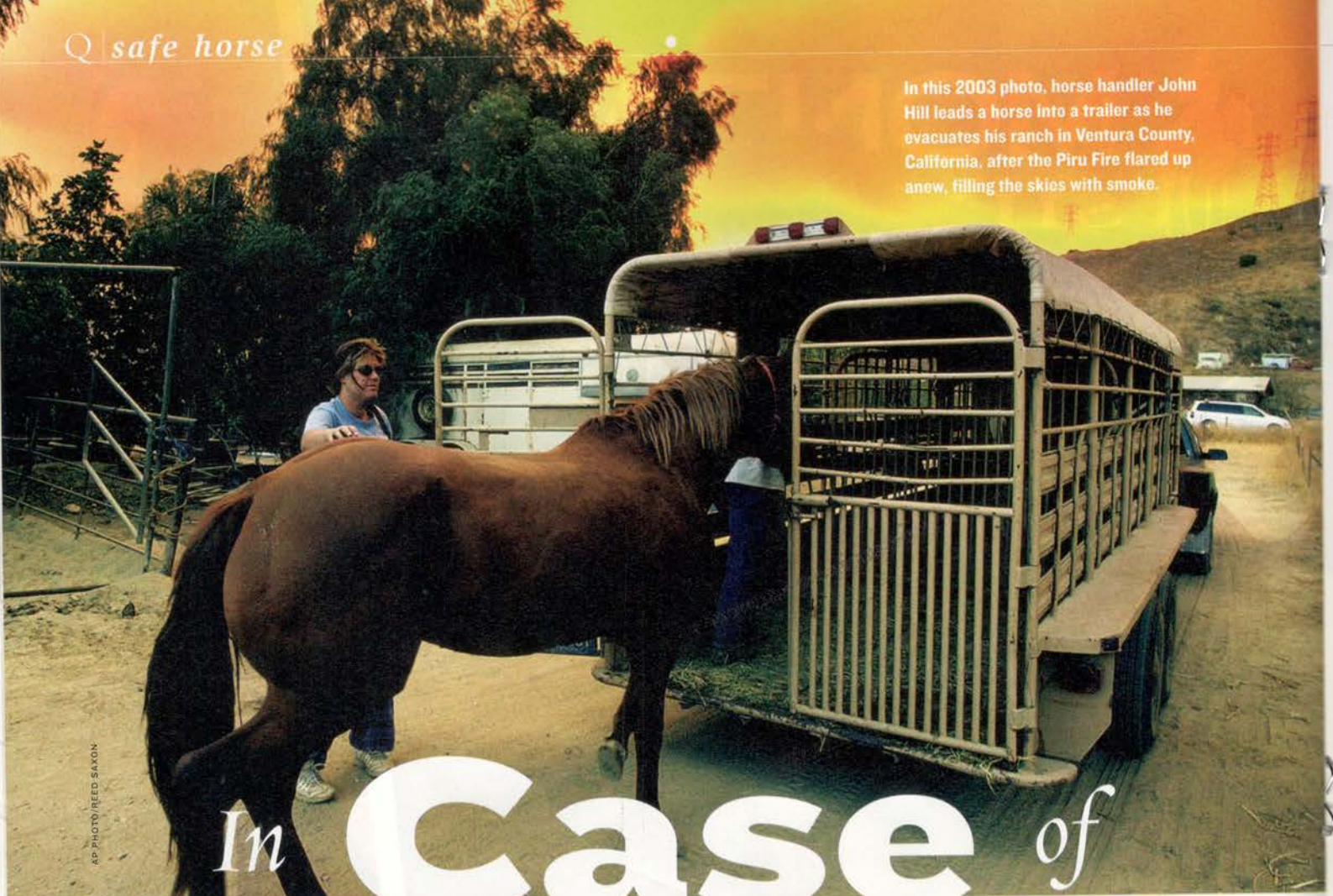


In this 2003 photo, horse handler John Hill leads a horse into a trailer as he evacuates his ranch in Ventura County, California, after the Piru Fire flared up anew, filling the skies with smoke.



AP PHOTO/NEED SAXON

In Case of **EMERGENCY**

Natural disasters are in the news.

Are you prepared to keep your horses safe?

By Holly Clanahan

CALIFORNIA'S 2015 VALLEY FIRE DEVoured MORE THAN 76,000 acres and almost 2,000 structures, making it one of the most destructive wildfires in the state's history. It claimed four people's lives and – most frightening of all – news reports said it moved so quickly that many people never even received an order to evacuate, or if they did, they only had minutes.

Now, imagine being in the middle of that with your horses like Jenn Parmeter-Holliman of Middletown, California, was. Her best friend, Blameitonmidnite, aka "Smokee," was a 29-year-old gray Quarter Horse mare who lived on Jenn's property with an also-retired Arabian mare named Keno.

"We had no warning to evacuate and no horse trailer available," Jenn says. "I wrote my number on my girls' feet and opened the gate." She turned her chickens loose and loaded up her dogs and cats ... and then had to leave.

"That night was horrible," she says. "I felt dead inside as I heard stories of horses seen deceased on the sides of the road, people missing and animals left locked in their homes with nobody able to get to them. It was heartbreaking."

The next morning, Jenn got the phone call she had been hoping for. Her horses were safe. Unfortunately, though, the structures on her property were not; she and her husband lost their home, garage and the horses' shelter.

Middletown was under evacuation orders for two weeks, Jenn says. Rescue groups took all animals and livestock out, as there was no water available. Her horses ended up at a vet clinic, and even her chickens were found alive; they went to a nearby farm.

When Jenn wrote to AQHA in February – on Smokee's 30th birthday – she said that she and her husband had been living in a camper on their property for four months, but friends had helped them rebuild fences and a shelter for the horses, so Smokee and Keno were back home and doing fine.

"Our horses are home, and all of our animals survived," Jenn says, "so we couldn't ask for anything more."

2015 was a record year for wildfires in the United States, and 2016 is already proving to be devastating in Canada, where the Fort McMurray wildfire has consumed more than 1,900 square miles in Alberta and Saskatchewan and, as of late May, was still burning.

This year may not be good for the United States, either, as years of drought in California have produced a lot of tinder.

"You've got 40 million dead trees, you've got 40 million opportunities for very intensive fires," U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, who oversees the U.S. Forest Service, told National Public Radio.

So what does that mean for horse owners? Get ready.

Depending on where you live, wildfires might not be the only thing to be aware of. Tornadoes, flooding and hurricanes are other potential hazards. Regardless of what kind of natural disaster your hometown may be prone to, it's always best to follow the lead of the Boy Scouts: Be prepared.

In Case of Wildfire

CANADIAN AUTHOR MICHELLE STAPLES HAS WRITTEN "SAVE YOUR Horse! A Horse Owner's Guide to Large Animal Rescue" that addresses fire safety, and she says pre-planning is crucial.

"It's imperative to have a good evacuation plan if you live in an area that could be hit by wildfire," she says. "That means: Sit down with your family long before any sign of trouble and decide what needs to be made ready to go with you. If you have cats, then you need carriers. Fish? Large containers with lids. If you have precious photos, put them on a USB thumb drive. You can make a list of things that should be inventoried and a record kept."

There's a nearly endless list of things like bills of sale and wills that you'll want to keep safe, and you'll also want to think about using online banking to pay bills in case you're not able to get mail at an evacuated address.

Make sure you know how you'll connect with family members in case of an urgent evacuation.

Every person and animal in the family should have a "go bag" with ID, medication and food and other essen-

tials. Horses might need an extra halter and lead rope and basic grooming supplies, while humans might want to have a change of clothes. Each go bag should also include one picture with you – you and the dog, you and the horse, etc. A good first-aid kit should also be included with the go bags.

"Plan more than one route out of your property," Michelle advises. "Unless you're at the end of a dead-end street, plan how you will get out if your main exit is closed off. If you are way out in the wilderness, figure out how long it will take to open the farthest gates on your "back 40" pasture so your horses can run to safety. Build that into your evacuation plan in case you can't get out."

Although there can be surprise situations like the fast-moving Valley Fire, if you know a wildfire is coming your way, it's best to evacuate early, at the first hint of trouble.

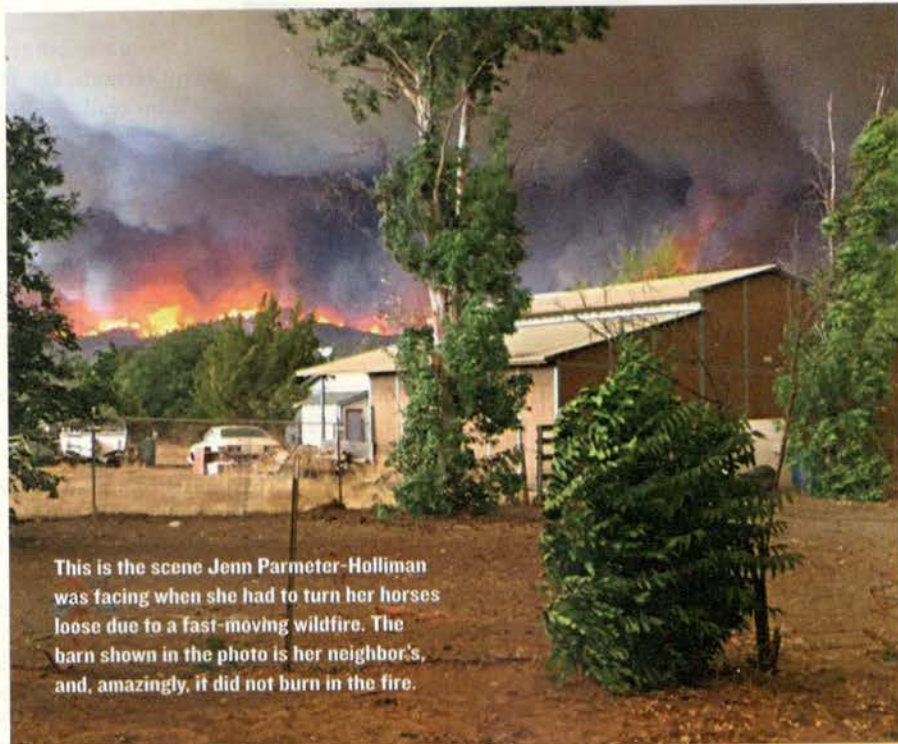
"If you're hauling a trailer, you need to be off the roads when the general evacuation order is given," Michelle says. "You can always go back and get your horses if the fire doesn't hit you."

You'll need to have multiple evacuation locations for your horses identified, in several different directions and distances. Michelle notes that with the Fort McMurray fire, people have been asked to evacuate more than once, as the fire moved toward their evacuation area.

To evacuate your horses, of course, you need to make sure you have a horse trailer available and that your horses will load easily. If you own a truck and trailer, keep them in working order, fueled up and ready to go – and keep them hooked up, if possible, for the fastest possible escape. If you don't have your own, make arrangements (well before any emergency) with a friend or neighbor to borrow a trailer or hitch a ride, and practice, practice, practice loading.

"There's no excuse for a horse to be left behind because he won't load," Michelle says.

This means you should practice loading in an unfamiliar trailer, in inclement weather, with a strange horse in the trailer, etc.



This is the scene Jenn Parmeter-Holliman was facing when she had to turn her horses loose due to a fast-moving wildfire. The barn shown in the photo is her neighbor's, and, amazingly, it did not burn in the fire.

COURTESY OF JENN PARMETER-HOLLIMAN

"Horses need to load under any conditions," Michelle says.

If you need help in this area, see the resource sidebar for some suggestions.

Coordinating with neighbors is also a great idea, especially if they have animals. If an urgent evacuation is ordered, perhaps a neighbor who is at home can help one who's out of town or at work. The absent neighbors may not get all their "stuff," but if their animals are whisked to safety, that may be the most important thing.

Your property's main entrance should already have your address in large numbers, visible from the road. Michelle recommends sturdy, high-contrast reflective numbers that would be easy to read in smoke. If you're evacuating, put a sign to that effect on your gate as you leave, so that emergency responders don't waste precious time looking for you.

Michelle also recommends fire-prevention techniques that, done ahead of time, may help improve your odds in case your property is literally in the line of fire.

Any vegetation should be cleared from your fence lines, along your driveway and for 100 feet around the perimeter of your buildings. If it can burn, cut it back or plow it. This can help in other situations, too, such as when someone tosses a cigarette from a passing car.

Rebecca Gimenez, author and president of Technical Large Animal Emergency Rescue, has other tips to help protect your structures in case of a wildfire. One would be to landscape your property with plants that are less likely to catch fire and slow to spread flames. Extension offices should be able to point you in the right direction. Remember that combustible mulch and situating plants too close to buildings are bad ideas.

Sprinkler systems in barns, which would likely require a generator to power the pumps once electricity is lost, can also slow down a fire. And commercial fire-block gels are available, intended to be sprayed on structures before evacuating, Rebecca says.

Equine Identity

Stolen Horse International, also known as NetPosse.com, offers these tips on identifying horses during natural disasters:

- Microchips are a permanent – but not visible – identifier. It is advisable to have a second means of identification in cases of emergency.
- Use a permanent marker to write your cell phone number on your horse's neck, body or hooves. Nail polish or paint will also work.
- Tags can be braided into mane or tail hair, or placed on collars or halters. These can be pulled off or lost, however.
- Take photos of you with your horse with a camera that has a date and time stamp. Show identifying markings.
- If your horses do become lost, NetPosse allows free disaster listings for all types of animals, for both lost and found.



Despite her advancing age, Blameitonmidnite was able to find her way to safety during last year's Valley Fire in California. She's still alive and well at age 30, well-loved by owner Jenn Parmeter-Holliman. This photo was taken as she arrived back home after being evacuated.

Horses in a Hurricane

DR. AMANDA HOUSE IS A CLINICAL ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR FOR THE University of Florida's College of Veterinary Medicine who says that over the years, Floridians have gained a lot of experience with hurricane preparedness. Many of their lessons have carry-over potential to other types of natural disaster planning, as well.

One of the biggest mistakes people make is not evacuating early enough, Dr. House says.

"You really want to have at least 72 hours," she says. "You don't want to get stuck on the road with horses in the trailer. You just don't want to take a chance that you're going to be encountering high wind speeds."

She says trailering in 40-mph winds or higher would be dangerous.

Instead, take advantage of modern meteorology and heed the advance warnings. Decide early on if you should evacuate or shelter in place – and that will depend on your location and the category of storm that is expected to hit you.

One thing Dr. House cautions against is leaving horses inside barns that may not be strong enough to withstand the impact of a falling tree or hurricane-speed winds. If your pasture has no electrical lines (which would be a big hazard), your horses may be safer in a pasture with high ground. Yes, they'll get wet, but that's better than being crushed inside an unsafe barn.

If you evacuate, you may be crossing state lines. Are your vaccinations, Coggins test and health certificate up to date? All horses should have a tetanus toxoid vaccine, and due to the increase in mosquitoes after massive rainfall, all horses should receive West Nile virus and Eastern and Western encephalitis vaccinations at the beginning of hurricane season.

A 2010 tornado obliterated parts of Holmes County, Mississippi. It's hard to find a safe spot for horses directly in the path of a large tornado.



AP PHOTO/CLARION-LEDGER, CHRIS TODD

If you shelter in place, consider that you may not be able to pump water or purchase feed for a while. Make sure you have enough water and feed stored to care for your horses for a week, if at all possible.

The leading cause of horse death during Hurricane Andrew in 1992 was collapsed barns, followed by electrocution and kidney failure secondary to dehydration.

Before the storm approaches, secure any moveable objects that could become hazards, and identify your horses with waterproof IDs, possibly braided into their tails or sealed in a Ziploc bag duct-taped to a leather halter.

Get more hurricane advice from the American Association of Equine Practitioners disaster planning guidelines. A direct link is in the digital edition of *America's Horse*. (See resource sidebar.)

Tornado Alley

"TORNADOES ARE A TOUGH CALL," MICHELLE SAYS.

If you leave your horse outside in the pasture, it's possible he could be hit by flying debris. Tornadoes can carry debris from miles away, so although you should secure anything moveable on your own property, that still doesn't ensure safety. Fences, too, may be taken down in a bad storm. See the ID sidebar for tips on identifying horses that have gotten loose.

If you leave your horse inside a barn, a direct hit from a large storm can wipe out virtually any structure. Examples of concrete horse "safe rooms" and even underground shelters are on the Internet, but the reality is that few horse owners have that option.

Michelle notes that horses left outside will find natural cover, such as a hill or copse of trees, and "do what they can to survive." Fly masks and even turnout blankets can provide some protection.

Rebecca says there are measures that can be taken – such as installing hurricane clips and reinforcing support beams – to help a barn withstand a small or mid-level tornado. But there are so many variables, it's hard to know the best option without benefit of hindsight.

"There is no right answer," Michelle says.

If there's time before a tornado hits, owners can evacuate.

But again, beware of being caught in high winds with a horse trailer. More often, tornadoes don't give much advance warning, and their path isn't clear until it's too late to trailer out.

As with all emergency situations, human life should be the priority. Don't stay outside – say, trying to catch horses – if a tornado is approaching. Get yourself and your family inside to safety. Rebecca recommends constructing a tornado safe room in the center of the horse barn, in case people are trapped there by a sudden storm.

With any natural disaster, some things simply aren't within our control. But with a well-thought-out plan and early action, you'll be as prepared as humanly possible, and your horses will be safer for it.

Hopefully, they'll come out safely on the other side, as Smokee did.

"She has been through hell and back, and she's still a warrior," Jenn says of her mare. "I wouldn't trade my American Quarter Horse for anything. She's an inspiration and my best friend." 🐾

Resources

If your horse does not load easily in a trailer, you'll want to address that issue well before any emergency strikes. For help, go to www.americashorsedaily.com and search for "trailer loading." You'll find tips from renowned horsemen like Joe Wolter and Brent Graef, as well as a free downloadable PDF with training advice from the late Bill Van Norman.

For "boots on the ground" assistance, contact a member of the AQHA Professional Horsemen's Association or the Certified Horsemanship Association.

The digital edition of *America's Horse* offers direct links to additional resources and information:

- AQHA and the Texas Animal Health Commission offer a checklist for emergency preparedness.
- Watch an AccuWeather.com video of the terrifying Valley Fire as it moved through Middletown, California.
- Get the AAEP guidelines for disaster planning for horse farms, with special emphasis on hurricane preparedness.