

Iowa Farmer Today

Disaster prep critical for ag operations

By Matison Bentley

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The scene after a storm knocked over grain bins near Calmar, Iowa, in late July last summer.

File photo

In recent years the world has experienced a steady increase in both the frequency and severity of natural disasters. Tropical weather patterns have changed, floods have become more destructive, and wildfires have expanded all leaving behind damage and devastation. In addition, Iowa has experienced more severe windstorms, like derechos.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) tracks disasters and found that since 1953 there have been 73 declared disasters in Iowa alone. The increase in disasters leaves humans, animals, property, critical infrastructure, and homeland security at risk for a wide range of weather-related hazards.

However, preparing for these types of emergencies can reduce the impact of the disaster by providing access to necessary resources and emergency communication procedures immediately upon disaster strike. Taking the time to prepare for a disaster improves awareness about the potential hazards and risks that one may face, which improves your operation's disaster resilience and can make your response more efficient.

Implementing an emergency preparedness plan can help Iowa farmers and agricultural workers assess their risk and incorporate preparedness steps into their workplace prior to a disaster. Despite knowing that extreme weather events have increased in likeliness, FEMA found in a National Household Survey that only 43% of Americans made an emergency action plan in 2021.

However, we know that preparedness plans for extreme weather events can reduce stress and anxiety, as well as reduce the severity of the impact of the event. For most workplaces, preparedness plans are enforced by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA); however, not all Iowa farms are regulated by OSHA. Instead, see if your insurance company provides assistance to help you think through the process of creating a preparedness plan tailored to your operation.

According to the American Community Survey from 2011-2015, 43% of Iowans live in rural communities and 79 of the 99 Iowa counties are considered rural. While many workplaces can benefit from an emergency preparedness plan, rural areas are especially in need of response measures.

Rural areas are uniquely challenging for first responders because of response time, communication abilities, access to resources, and remote geography. Response time can be problematic when the situation is critical, such as a traumatic injury, when minutes can mean life or death. Communication in rural areas can be an issue if there is no way to correspond with other necessary personnel or operations. Rural emergency response systems may lack necessary personnel, as most responders are typically volunteer.

Finally, the remote geography is a challenge to first responders because of the isolated locations of many farms. Having a plan in place can help think through emergency response before emergency services are needed, which produces better chances of response and survival.

Emergency preparedness plans do not have to happen in one day or cost a fortune. They can be tailored to your business or home and take as much or as little time to complete as you would like. Most importantly, an emergency action plan should consider all possible risks while still being feasible for your farm. Organizations like OSHA, FEMA and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) have step-by-step preparedness plan templates that walk you through the process.

In addition, discussing the matter with your insurance company can give you an idea of what to focus on for your operation. They may also offer templates that can be used to get started. Many of the templates found online are based on OSHA recommendations for an emergency action plan. The takeaway from these organizations and their suggestions is that you are thinking about your risk and how you can become prepared for such disasters.

Key things to think about when crafting a plan for your operation may include evacuation procedures and escape routes. Floor plans can be added to give an overall view of the entire building. Reporting procedures are important to add for alerting authorities as well as workers and guests that may be present on the property. You may choose to select a meeting area or muster point to help account for all people in the event of an emergency.

Training procedures for new employees should be addressed within the plan and the plan should be clearly communicated with all staff members including at the point of hire, when job responsibilities and duties change, and when updates are made. Policies and procedures for updating and maintaining the emergency preparedness plan should be addressed as well.

Preparedness techniques can not only provide you with the tools needed to respond to the disaster effectively and efficiently, they can ultimately help save your life. When a disaster takes place, there is little time to react. Preparing before the event will give you time to gather necessary information and communicate with your family members and employees.

This is also a great time to get feedback from others and update the plan regularly as needed. Including local first responders in conversations during the planning stage is a great way to get feedback and build a strong relationship. This also allows the responders to familiarize themselves with you and your farming operation. First responders can also help identify areas that need work or areas that were well done. Giving this opportunity to first responders can also allow them to gather resources they may need ahead of time so that they, too, are prepared.

In 2020, 368 farmers or farm workers died from a work-related injury. Don't let the next disaster put your operation among those numbers. To be better prepared is to be more disaster resilient. Working closely with members of the farm, including family members and workers, as well as local emergency responders can help identify the needs of the farm. Understand your risk and address issues that may arise due to those risks. Develop a plan and update it often. All these things can work together to protect life and land in the event of an emergency on your farm.

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