

***Iowa Farmer Today***

# Fire prevention important for winter and spring

By Brandi Janssen

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Fire extinguishers should be wall mounted in every farm building. Make sure your family members and employees know where they are and how to operate them.

Photo courtesy Central States Center for Agricultural Safety and Health

Despite the 3 inches of rain that came down a week or so ago, my area of the state is still categorized as experiencing “moderate drought.” Central Iowa is largely in a severe drought and several counties in the northwest are experiencing extreme drought.

As the natural foliage dries out and dies back, and as many farmers turn to indoor shop chores and maintenance for the winter, it’s a good time to think about basic farm fire prevention.

Field fires were a major concern this fall because of the dry conditions, and numerous fire departments were deployed as a result. But now we are approaching the seasons where farm structure fires are most common — winter and spring.

Already last month 12 fire departments responded to a major farm fire in Muscatine County, Iowa, that resulted in several buildings lost. Earlier this spring, an overnight barn fire started because of a heat lamp, killing eight farm animals and destroying three buildings.

Fire prevention planning should be thought out across all buildings and structures, keeping in mind that each structure likely has a number of ignition sources and hazards.

Start with general building safety. Any new construction should include flame retardant or fire-resistant materials. Install lightning rods and grounding cables on taller structures.

Basic housekeeping can also go a long way in fire prevention. Cobwebs and dust are combustible, and keeping a clean, clear space around buildings and general yard areas can help reduce the risk of a fire spreading from one building to another.

Electrical safety is critical. Consider both the electrical systems in buildings as well as the appliances you might use in them. Enclose any

exposed wiring and keep areas around electrical panels clear. Any electrical repairs or installations should be performed or inspected by a licensed electrician.

Ensure that all fans, heaters and heat lamps are designed for industrial or agricultural use. The fire risk is extremely high when residential products are used in farm buildings. If possible, only operate this type of equipment when someone is in the structure.

Many farm buildings become catch-all storage spaces, so consider and control potential ignition sources. Any flammable or combustible materials, such as gasoline, kerosene, paint thinners, or paper should be stored in labeled containers away from any ignition sources. Keep engines, motors and machinery well maintained and clean to prevent malfunction and overheating. Allow all equipment to cool down before refueling, and refuel outdoors.

Prevention is ideal, but you should also plan ahead in case of a fire. You may only have a few minutes to act, so thinking through a fire-safety plan is time well spent in advance. Identify all exits and evacuation routes for people and livestock and have a plan in place for relocating livestock if they need to be evacuated from a fire. Keep your livestock inventories up to date, including animals, vaccines and medication schedules.

Make sure your family and employees are informed of the fire safety plan. Even better, have them help develop it.

Your local fire department will likely be willing to come out and tour your facilities. You can provide them with a map of your farm that includes power shut-offs and water source locations. To ensure that firefighters can access buildings if they need to, maintain a roadway or solid yard area for each building. Maintain your well pumps and ensure that they are visible to emergency workers if needed.

Fire protection can include sprinkler systems and fire extinguishers. It's a good practice to have at least one ABC-type extinguisher in all farm buildings and in other areas where there is a fire risk, such as around grain drying and processing equipment. Make sure all employees and family members know where to find and how to operate fire extinguishers.

If the worst happens, and you have a fire in one of your outbuildings, the first piece of advice is probably the most difficult: Do not panic. Call 911 and tell the dispatcher your farm address and location and what type of building is on fire.

Be prepared to tell them the status of the fire — is there smoke showing or is the building fully engulfed? Notify them if there are any animals or people in the building. Under no circumstances should you enter the building. If you are the only one present, no one will know you are inside. If the roof is on fire, it could collapse any time.

A farm fire can move quickly and be devastating, resulting in loss of property, livestock or human life. Take as many fire prevention precautions as possible to reduce your risk this winter.

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