

Iowa Farmer Today

Storm safety: Plan ahead for severe spring storms that can damage farms

By Tabitha Kuehn

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A flooded field in Jasper County, Iowa, May 22 after a round of severe storms moved across the state.

Photo courtesy Abbie Van Raden

The Midwest has already seen numerous rounds of severe weather this spring, including multiple tornadoes, and it does not appear to be slowing down as summer begins.

As I write this in late May, my local news is updating the viewing area on severe thunderstorm watches and warnings being issued and reminding everyone to stay weather aware as we go into an afternoon that has risk for large hail, high winds and possible tornadoes.

Ideally, you are all aware of the basics of safety during severe storms — seek shelter in a basement or small interior room, stay away from windows, have a flashlight accessible, protect your head and neck with your arms, helmets or blankets and pillows.

Following these actions are critical for your safety during storms that produce strong winds, large hail and tornadoes.

Farming and severe weather can both be unpredictable, and different farming situations can pose unique risks during severe weather events. The first step for farm safety during severe weather is always preparation.

Make sure you, your family members and all employees can identify where safe shelters are on the farm.

Identify reinforced structures or rooms that will offer the most protection — for example, an old, leaning barn may not withstand strong winds as well as an interior bathroom in a shop building.

Have a communication plan so you know what areas people are working in and can contact them about weather.

Maintaining an updated inventory of farm equipment and tools can help with identifying recovery needs in the event of damage due to severe weather.

Check weather reports daily and try to always have access to weather information, such as weather apps, local news or a weather radio. If you see severe storms in the forecast, consider altering plans and staying at a location with a safe storm shelter you can access if needed.

Rushing to complete tasks before a storm can lead to many dangerous situations, such as being in an area without safe shelter when severe weather strikes or injuries caused by unsafe practices for the sake of quickness.

If you are operating a tractor when a tornado forms, do not remain in the tractor. Get out of the tractor and make your way to a sturdy shelter.

If there is no shelter, find a low area such as a ditch and lie down, covering your head and neck with your arms.

Be sure not to lay right next to the tractor — strong winds could blow the tractor over and crush you if you are too close.

The path of a tornado can be unpredictable and hard to gauge, so you should not attempt to outrun a tornado in your equipment.

It is also important to be prepared for the dangers of lightning strikes. If you are outside during a lightning storm, avoid high spots and stay away from tall objects such as trees and posts. Get low and minimize your contact with the ground, like crouching down with your hands around your knees.

If there is no threat of a tornado, it may be safer to remain inside a vehicle or tractor in the case of lightning.

Flash flooding can also be a concern during severe storms. Flash floods occur quickly and can create deadly situations.

Unlike during a tornado or thunderstorms, low areas should be avoided during flash flooding. Do not try to drive through flooded areas. Vehicles can be swept away in less than a foot of water.

Severe weather can be frightening and stressful in the moment, and for many farmers the stress doesn't end once the skies clear.

Flooding, strong winds, hail and tornadoes can all change a farming operation in moments. Crops, equipment, buildings and infrastructure may be damaged.

However, there are programs designed to help farmers recover from disasters like these.

“There’s a couple of things for people to think about when they’ve gone through this,” said Matt Russell, executive director of the Iowa Farm Service Agency.

The first of Russell’s recommendations is getting good documentation as you assess the impacts of the disaster.

“In the moment, don’t worry about getting right into the county office,” he said. “Remind yourself to snap some pictures. You’re going to want to have a record of what happened so that when you get in to do our programs you’ve got good documentation.”

He also suggests keeping receipts for services, such as clearing debris from fields, so the process for getting reimbursed through disaster programs is smoother.

Russell recommends that folks reach out to their local USDA offices when they are ready. The FSA has 97 offices across the state, the NRCS has 100 and Rural Development has 10.

These are all places you can go to start the conversation about recovery efforts on your farm and learn what programs may be available. Learn more about the USDA Disaster Programs at tinyurl.com/5avzhafe.

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