

Fire Prevention

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A barn fire is one of most every horse or farm owner's worst nightmares, and I have been unfortunate enough over the years to have several clients lose horses and property in these devastating situations. And while not every fire is avoidable, acts of God and just plain bad luck are often at play, there are still a number of ways you can lessen the chances of facing the loss and heartbreak of a barn fire.

As with most dangerous scenarios, your best defense is a good offense, so following are a dozen tips to help keep you and your horses safe.

1. If there are any concerns regarding your electrical system, or you see anything such as frayed wires or are experiencing recurring short circuits, power outages, or other electrical issues, have a licensed electrician inspect your electrical system to make sure it is up to code and safe, and consider asking for an evaluation of the number of circuits in your barn to ensure you're not plugging too many appliances into the same circuit, potentially causing a dangerous overload. Don't use extension cords unless absolutely necessary (see next paragraph), and buy heavy duty ones and only plug in one appliance per cord.

Also, make sure the appliance you are using is safe to be plugged into an extension cord. Some items, like certain heaters, are only designed to be plugged directly into a socket—read the product information to see if it is safe to be used with an extension cord. In addition, frequently check all electrical cords to make sure they aren't frayed, and if you find a cord that is damaged, do not try repair it such as wrapping it in electrical tape. Have it replaced or toss it.

One last prevention tip when it comes to electricity – get a cat (or two)! Mice and other small rodents can chew on not just electrical cords, but also wires within your walls, and you may never see the damage until it's too late. There are many reasons to keep these vermin clear of your barn, and this ranks as one of the most important. No doubt your local animal shelter or rescue center has many candidates who would be thrilled to have this job.

2. If you use fans, make sure that all cords are out of the reach of bored horse lips and teeth, and that the fans (actually any appliances in the barn) are dust free, since accumulating dust can be combustible. In addition, pay attention to any recalls for appliances like fans and heaters. You may not receive direct notice on these, so every so often go on line and do a web search with the brand and item type with the word "recall" and see if anything comes up.

3. If you have a washer and dryer in your barn, never turn them on and then leave the barn unsupervised. In addition, make sure your dryer is vented away from combustible material and clean your dryer's internal vent with absolutely every load, and clean the main external vent at least every month.

4. If at all possible, store hay, shavings and straw in a building separate from your barn. If you must store hay in your barn, allow for plenty of ventilation (lofts can get extremely hot in the summer, which could contribute to hay spontaneously combusting), and make sure that the hay is properly cured and baled, and always kept dry.

5. Never, ever, allow smoking in or anywhere near the barn or any outbuildings. Also, try to prevent work done in or near your barn that involves welding or propane torches. If there are no other options, advise the contractors as to the very flammable nature of the materials they will be working near, and make sure to clear out as much of that material from their work area as possible, including hay, straw, shavings, etc.
6. If you must use a heater, read the directions and follow them to the letter. Make sure that the area around the heater is clear of anything that could catch fire such as rags, blankets, stray hay or straw, or paper.
7. Be careful when disposing of rags used to clean tack or hooves, and also keep items such as pesticides and paint away from any heat source. Oil or petroleum products as well as various pesticides and paints are combustible, and a pile of dirty rags is especially dangerous. Clean or remove these items from the property as soon as possible, or if you must store them temporarily, don't leave them in a pile or in a bag, since they must have plenty of ventilation.
8. Install smoke/heat detectors as well as all-purpose dry chemical fire extinguishers throughout the barn (the more the merrier) and check monthly to make sure they are functioning properly. These can be invaluable – alerting you to danger and giving you the chance to prevent a small fire from turning into a full scale blaze. Also, make sure that your clients and staff know where the fire extinguishers are located – they're not much use to you tucked in the back of a cabinet where no one can find them.

Also consider the feasibility of installing a sprinkler system, especially if you're building a barn from scratch. Speaking of which, if you are building from the ground up, take into consideration the materials you use. Metal and concrete are of course the safest, but for some aren't considered very horse-friendly or aesthetically pleasing, though modifications can be made to lessen the impact of both those concerns. If you use wood, consider heavy-timber construction, and investigate the option of some type of fire-retardant lumber.

9. Don't forget that hot engines from any vehicles—cars, trucks, tractors and other farm equipment--can spark fires. Do not park any of them on or near combustible material such as piles of leaves, hay, or bedding, and if possible do not park them near your barn or other structures. And keep any grass/weeds in parking areas trimmed, as a hot engine can potentially cause long grass to catch fire.
10. Consider installing a lightning rod. These do not attract lightning, they just conduct the electricity from the lightning strike that would have hit the structure anyway. To be effective though, they must be installed and grounded correctly, so make sure the rod is installed by someone experienced and properly trained.
11. Communicate with your local fire department. If you are located in a rural area, you have a better chance of working with firefighters who are at least familiar with horses, but regardless, once a year invite the crew to your place so that they are familiar with the route and the layout of your facility. With this in mind, make sure that your location is clearly marked with items such as a sign at your main entrance or gate.

When the firefighters arrive for a tour of the facility, give them some hands-on tips on how to handle the horses--making sure to emphasize that in the event of a fire, they will be dealing with terrified, potentially dangerous creatures--and how best to work with them safely. In addition, you might want to ask the local fire chief to inspect your place for any hazards you might have missed.

12. Have halters and lead lines outside every stall, hung the same way, every day, which gives

you the best chance of moving quickly in an emergency. If you're lucky enough to design your own place, consider dutch doors for each stall that open to the outside of the barn, which allows you to avoid having to run through the burning barn to get the horses out to safety. Also, work with your horses to make sure they are as obedient and spook-proof as possible. A horse that is hard-to-handle under normal circumstances will be nearly impossible to save in an emergency, and will be much more likely to injure the person trying to save it.

Despite all your precautions, the worst might happen. If it does, your first priority is the safety of the humans and horses on the premises. Before you do anything, call 911. Do not hang up without making sure the operator has all the info they need. Then evacuate the horses as best you can. It's best to try to relocate each horse into some sort of enclosure, especially since there have been instances where horses have run back into burning buildings.

Your impulse will be to get absolutely every horse out of the barn, but this may not be possible. Evacuating a barn is a calculated risk and as heartbreaking as it may be, eventually you might have to give up in order to save your life or the lives of those trying to help.

Worst Case Scenario

Despite your best efforts, you may still find yourself facing the devastation of a barn fire, which is when an insurance policy for your horses and business can be invaluable. For more information, visit the Broadstone [FAQ](#) and [Quote](#) pages, or give us a call at 888-687-8555.

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