

## How to Prevent Barn Fires

Barn fires can be devastating for farmers and their families, including their farm animals. The financial and emotional impact of barn fires can be felt for many years after a barn fire event. And, what ends up being a hardship for farmers, affects all of us.

### Operational Preventative Actions

**Fire Department Inspections** – Annual inspections by your local fire department will help ensure that your electrical systems in your barn are working properly and free of fire hazards. This will also allow fire personnel to familiarize themselves with your farm’s electric panels and water supply, which will improve their response time in the event of a barn fire.

**Fire Extinguishers** – Ensuring that you have an ample number of fire extinguishers strategically placed throughout your barn is essential. Be sure to place them close to electrical panels and any other potential ignition sources, and to check them annually to determine if they are working properly.

**Emergency Planning** – The best way to ensure that all farm personnel are prepared in the event of a barn fire is extremely important. Your preventative plan-of-action list should include:

- Mapping out the barn and identifying potential fire hazards and sources of ignition
- Posting contact information for key farm personnel and emergency response units
- List step-by-step procedures to follow should fire break out
- A clear and concise process for evacuating farm animals in case of a fire
- Annual fire drills and fire extinguisher training for all farm employees

### Structural Elements

**Sprinkler Systems** – The most effective way for putting out fires and reducing damage and fatalities caused by them is to install a sprinkler system. You should consult an expert to determine which type of sprinkler system is best for your particular barn since there are a variety to choose from. There are a number of wet, dry, or pre-action types of sprinkler systems. Costs and maintenance will vary, depending on which system you purchase.

**Heat, Flame, or Smoke Detection Systems** – Another way to protect your barn from fire is with early fire detection systems. These include heat, flame, or smoke detectors. At the very least, one of these systems should be professionally installed in your barn and tested on a regular basis. You should consult an expert to determine which types of early detection systems are best for particular situation.

**Electrical Systems** – The best practice, according to experts, is to construct a separate electrical or mechanical room apart from the barn to house service panels and other electrical equipment. If that is not possible, be sure to keep the electrical service panel away from livestock areas.

**Electrical Equipment Usage** – It’s a good idea to try and limit the use of temporary electrical equipment. Anything that is not hardwired directly into your electrical system is considered temporary. This includes any piece of equipment that is plugged into a wall outlet such as heaters, power tools, and lighting. Frequent or long-term use like these increases your risk of a fire being started by a faulty outlet or extension cord, a space heater that has malfunctioned, fence chargers, and a variety of other sources.

**On-Site Water Storage** – Rural areas often do not have nearby fire hydrants. When hydrants aren't accessible in your area, emergency responders have to truck water in to extinguish the fire. When a barn catches fire, every minute counts. Large farms should install on-site water storage units to assist firefighters in having access to water.

**Building Materials** – Whenever possible, building materials for interior walls and ceilings used in the construction of the barns and buildings on your farm should be made with fire-resistant materials that have low flame-spread ratings. These materials are categorized as 'Class A' by the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) and other professional organizations. Installing firewalls is also recommended wherever applicable. If you have more than one building where animals are housed, allow ample distance between buildings or barns to help prevent a fire from spreading to multiple locations. The NFPA recommends keeping 60 feet minimum of distance between each animal housing facility on your farm.

### **Additional On-Site Precautions**

**Hotworks Safety** – Anything that produces intense heat or sparks is considered 'hotworks'. This includes activities such as welding, cutting with torches, or grinding. The sparks produced from these types of actions can cause nearby combustible materials such as hay, manure, or other debris to ignite. Not only can a fire start, but in some cases, an explosion can occur. The best way to perform these jobs safely is to do them outside and away from the building and other combustible materials. If this is not possible, move all combustible materials away from where you are working and make sure there is adequate ventilation to prevent buildup of combustible gasses. And, always have a fire extinguisher nearby.

### **Farm Access Precautions**

- **Roadways and Parking Areas** – Be sure that your access roadways and driveways are wide and free of deep ruts and bumps and keep 20 feet wide fire/emergency lanes around all buildings. Be sure that regular vehicles are parked in designated areas to keep access roads open for emergency vehicles and equipment. Also, parking areas should not be located next to a barn or stable.
- **Gates** – Be sure any gates on your farm are wide enough for emergency vehicles and set back far enough so that vehicles are not on the main road when stopping to open or close them.
- **Overhead Obstructions** – Any overhead wires on roadways and driveways should be high enough for emergency vehicles to pass under safely. Also be sure that any low-hanging tree limbs and branches are trimmed back.

**Keep Your Barn Tidy** – Remove any piles of trash, or combustible materials in and around your barn. If a fire is ignited, it will be less likely to spread if it has nothing to feed on. Most importantly keep any fuel on your farm is stored away from your barn and other buildings.

## **Conclusion**

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