

Emergency Preparedness for Commercial Poultry Farms

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Hurricane season runs from June through November, and typically hurricanes are on the top of everyone's list when they think of preparing for disasters. However emergency preparedness is not seasonal and must be considered all year round. Other emergencies like tornados, flash flooding, snow or ice storms can cause just as much damage and appear with little warning,

How do you prepare your poultry farm for a disaster? First, check with your integrator to see if they have an emergency action plan written out for their growers. The following recommendations are from poultry colleagues who have experienced natural disasters.

Tornados, snow or ice storms may hit unexpectedly. Continuous general house maintenance, like fixing torn curtains, loose tin or fixtures, will help to reduce structural damage to the house.

Having generators is a must since power outages can occur during a storm or just due to a traffic accident knocking a power pole down. A minimum 25-kilowatt generator is recommended. Portable generators cannot handle a huge load, so do not start all of the house equipment at once. Start your water pump first, and then turn on feed lines, fans, etc. as needed; you may have to alternate between them. Fill the fuel tanks. Test the generator before you need it – run it once a week under load. Test the automatic switching gear. Place the generator where it will be protected from the weather and won't get flooded. Is it possible to connect the generator to a well to pump water?

Have all fuel tanks full with extra available for generators, tractors, chainsaws, etc. Have extra batteries for flashlights and charge the mobile phone.

Flying debris from hurricane winds can cause major damage to the house and curtains. Make sure equipment inside and outside the house is stored away or secured (i.e. wheelbarrows, loose pump houses, pallets, lumber, etc.). Open the curtains on empty houses to reduce pressure building up inside. Houses containing birds should have the curtains, fans and inlets on the windward side of the house closed, and the leeward side opened only 6-12 inches; lock them into place. Do this when the winds are getting high. Beware of birds overheating.

Fill feed tanks, bins, feed lines and water tanks (including extra medication tanks) full ahead of the storm, and then turn the power off until the storm passes. Seal feed bin lids to prevent admitting water. Raise feed lines 4-5 feet if flooding is a possibility. Many feed line motors and fans were ruined from flooding in Hurricane Floyd. Some feed lines had to be entirely dismantled in order to remove all the feed which had become cement after getting wet. Be prepared to ration the feed you have. Road closures may delay feed truck deliveries. Have wheelbarrows and buckets available to deliver feed and water by hand.

Reinforce the end doors with stakes to keep floodwaters from pushing them open and subsequently letting the drowned birds float out of the house. Dim the lights to help prevent piling and cannibalism. Have extra shavings for wet litter control. Whether to keep the gas brooder stoves turned on or off during a storm can be controversial. Turning the gas brooders off to prevent a house fire may risk chilling and piling of the chicks or poults.

After the storm, check the house and birds for damage. Ventilation, water supply, feed supply and structural repairs should be assessed in that order. The flock supervisors should drive the roads before sending out feed, egg, chick and poult trucks.

An evacuation for several days can be disastrous for the flock. Set equipment to run on autopilot. In warmer weather, anticipate the hottest conditions and set the ventilation to accommodate for that. The opposite applies for winter weather.

Develop a plan that outlines options to handle massive die-offs. Options include rendering, landfill, incineration, composting or burial. Burial sites must be pre-approved by the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC) prior to burial of birds. Other methods of disposal may not require an inspector to come to the site, but you must notify DHEC immediately of the situation and your plans for disposal. Call DHEC at (888) 481-0125 or (803) 253-6488. Many farms affected by Hurricane Floyd in 1999, had to bury carcasses above ground temporarily until the water table went down. Remove dead birds out of the house as soon as possible before they decompose. On farms where the floodwaters receded quickly, carcasses were easier to move right away than waiting a few more days and dealing with a soupy mess. Have garbage bags, covered containers or covered trucks available to temporarily hold dead birds.

Whether you use your company's plan or develop your own, the most important point is to have and use a plan. BE PREPARED!!

References:

Many thanks to my colleagues for this valuable information.

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John W. Worley & Michael Czarick, University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Service, Poultry Housing Tips, Sept. 1996, Vol 8: No 9.