

Protecting Your Farm in a Crisis

by Jacki Perkins, Organic Dairy and Livestock Specialist

Recently, the Maine Dairy Promotion Board, in partnership with Cooperative Extension and the Dairy Checkoff, organized an informational meeting on how to prepare for and deal with different types of crises on the farm. Here are some useful strategies that apply to more than just dairy farms, and some resources available during major crisis events.

Form Your Crisis Team

Know who you would need to contact in case of issues on the farm. Create a list of some of the most important of these contacts, including their primary phone number. Some suggestions are:

- Farm owner(s)
- Mechanic
- Plumber
- Electrician
- Equipment dealer
- Veterinarian
- Legal council
- Any organizations available for assistance (i.e. state lab, UMaine Cooperative Extension, MOFGA Ag Services, etc.)

Besides having a list of contacts, there are several things to consider when evaluating a potential crisis.

1. Will this problem go outside my farm gate? Is it a problem to my reputation, or the reputation of my industry?
2. Will this problem significantly affect my bank account, or my ability to make money?
3. Will this problem become viral, or will my customers see it?
4. Will this have an effect on how the day, week, or month will go?

It is also important to consider potential disasters such as floods, extended power outages and structure fires, and to have a plan in place for actions you can take.

Designate tasks to members of your Crisis Team, and provide them a written list of what needs to be done.

1. Create a list of anyone needing to be notified immediately in the event of a crisis (i.e. staff, your veterinarian, any stakeholders) and a plan for contacting them.
2. Have a plan for incoming requests for assistance by your neighbors and community.
3. Know where your emergency response center is located and what their priorities are.
4. Create and maintain a list of local media contacts.

There are also steps to take to protect yourself and your farm from the tactics of animal rights activists. In some cases, activists will pose as farm workers to gain access and will then document and publicly release footage aimed at damaging the reputation of the farm. It is important to be aware of the difference between animal welfare and animal rights, and to acknowledge that many customers who have been removed from agricultural settings for generations will not distinguish the difference.

What You Can Do

On the farm:

1. Hire the right people
 - Research Animal Ag Alliance activist database (i.e. do a Google search of their name)
- Ask about:
- Do they support animal rights organizations?
 - Do they need housing/how long is their commute?
 - How long have they lived in the area?
 - How much experience do they have with agriculture?
 - List of references?
 - Consider requiring employees to sign an Animal Care Agreement.
 - Partner new employees with trusted ones.

- Post biosecurity or posted signs to warn people of where the public is not permitted.
- Get to know your local sheriff, veterinarian, and neighbors so that they have a working knowledge of how your farm operates
- Consider adding security cameras to areas such as birthing pens and sick animal handling facilities; photos can easily misconstrue a normally benign situation and having your own documentation could be a good defense.

On the Internet:

1. Own your farm's domain name
2. Find and take ownership of your farm's Facebook page
3. Take ownership of Google business graph
4. Set up Google alerts
5. Consider starting a farm Facebook and website in order to share positive farm stories
6. Answer questions from the public as thoroughly as possible
7. Do some digging to determine if an animal rights activist is trolling you; block and delete this person WITHOUT engaging them

If you witness abuse, and wish to report it anonymously, please use <http://seeit-stopit.org>.

Crisis Contacts

1. Maine Emergency Power Outage - 1-800-452-8735 or (207)624-4400
2. Michele Walsh, DVM (state veterinarian) - (207)287-7615 or (207)215-6727
3. Disaster Distress Hotline (for emotional distress) - 1-800-985-5990 or text 66746 with "talkwithus"
4. Sarah Littlefield (Executive Director, Maine Dairy Promotion Board) - (207)287-3621 or (207)446-6121

