Post-wildfire trauma in livestock

Adrenaline-fueled panic and confusion may affect livestock long after traumatic events such as wildfires pass, which means producers need to use caution when working with the animals.

- Horses tend to be more likely to return to the familiarity of their home environment. It is recommended horse managers shut barn doors or gates to prevent animals from running back to their home.
- Normal handling techniques may be ineffective with livestock who are still traumatized from a recent wildfire, especially if the wildfires have passed but are still burning within the sensory range of the animals.
- Livestock reactions can range from nervousness to panic to aggressive attempts to escape anyone and anything. Only experienced livestock handlers should handle the animals during highly stressful events.
- Upon returning to the farm or ranch, livestock producers need to quickly locate their animals and make sure they have access to clean water and high-quality forage with a protein and mineral supplement. Livestock that do not have adequate nutrition and water can deteriorate rapidly in terms of their physical condition.
- Check surviving livestock for signs of injury. Panicked livestock often are hurt or killed by running into fences and barriers while fleeing. Common health concerns after livestock experience a wildfire include:
  - Burned eyes
  - Burned areas of skin
  - Lung inflammation and edema – swelling caused by fluid buildup in the body's tissues – from smoke inhalation
- Smoke inhalation may take four to six weeks to heal. Burns on feet may not show clinical signs for three weeks. Signs could be severe such as sloughing of the hooves, which would require euthanasia of the animal. Cows with burned teats and udder likely will need to be culled.
- Bulls need to have a breeding soundness examination to ensure the sheath and scrotum are not damaged.
- Minor skin burns may be treated with a topical antibiotic and/or injectable antibiotics.
- Cattle with major skin burns likely will need to be euthanized. Cattle producers should talk with their veterinarians who can provide knowledgeable assistance in making these tough decisions.
- A veterinarian will provide valuable input on a post-wildfire checklist.
- Since it can take a while for symptoms to appear, livestock will need to be monitored for several weeks after a wildfire.

For more information, contact your local Extension office. To find your local office, go to: oces.okstate.edu.