

Emergency Protocols Helped Area Farm Handle Tornado Aftermath

Elsinger Family Shares Tips for Disaster Plans

*By Dr. Al Martens
of Waupun Vet Services*

The farm day on May 15th started like most with a quick look at the weather app. Storms were predicted for later in the day. Every farmer looks at the weather app on their phone every morning, and the predictions affect that day's plans. Years ago, everyone listened to the radio news, but the weather prediction was the most important news. Late in the afternoon, a tornado watch was posted for the Mayville area.

Elsinger Farms, including Jeff, Brenda, and son Mike, who are all partners, started getting the farm buttoned up with the warning. Shed doors were closed, cattle moved into buildings and Jeff headed to the family home down the road to button it up. Brenda had a written protocol for storms, and one of her preparation points is to make sure her books are updated, and current checks and bills are entered. Before cloud backup, she would make a copy of current financials on a jump drive and carry it with her, so she knew where it was.

Then came the tornado warning, both the phones and the siren in Lomira went off. Coincidentally, Brenda and Mike commented on a different looking cloud pattern, Mike googled it and got a warning that the pattern was indicative of a coming tornado. Brenda shut down the parlor and moved all the employees to the farmhouse basement. Again, this was part of her written protocol. Mike joined them after a last-minute building check. Jeff didn't even have time to move patio furniture at the off-farm house, he just headed for the basement. Other employees off site had been instructed to seek shelter in basements.



On May 15th an EF-1 tornado struck the Elsinger Farm located by Lomira. An emergency plan was crucial in helping in the aftermath.

The storm came and looking out the small basement window, Brenda and Mike heard wind, saw rain and hail, but never heard any distinctive freight train sounds people associate with tornadoes.

When the weather cleared, Jeff got a call saying that a neighbor with heifers had his shed down. Jeff called Mike and Brenda to meet him at the neighbors' so the two of them headed one direction out of the farmhouse. The employees headed back to the parlor. Then the milking crew came running around the corner of the house, the barn had been hit. Actually, it had been split in half, with half picked up and dumped in the manure pit and adjoining field.

The calf hutches, with tethered calves, were blown up against a barn wall, with two additional hutches out in the marsh. Good news, the calves in the marsh survived, but several others didn't. The windows in the parlor were pulled out or smashed in, from either pressure change or flying debris. The skid steer loader that would have been cleaning stalls had the windows shattered. Imagine what that would do to a driver.

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What would you do? How would you react? What direction would you turn? Who would you call?

Brenda called Jeff, then Dr. Monty, then a friend in the fire department wondering if the fire department could help. Of course, this is rural Wisconsin, they would all come. Brenda got the fire department, eight veterinarians, and half the rest of the community.

Mike, first to the barn, grabbed a piece of twisted metal siding and got a shock. He killed the farm power immediately. That's when everyone started arriving. Brenda is thankful for so many people, name after name that stepped up, hauling cattle and taking cattle in, and especially cleaning up and freeing cattle. Every time she told me the story different memories popped up as different events occurred simultaneously. There was so much going on.

I am in awe. Brenda had a written emergency preparation plan. Not only that, but she had also reviewed it a week earlier with her employees. She had used the Dairy Cares program from Merck years ago as a template for any disaster, and she reviewed it yearly. She actually suggested I write this article because she wanted every farmer to write a plan, and she wanted to share suggestions. The reality is, whether it's a tornado, or a fire, or a snow load collapse (which Mike had always assumed would be their disaster), an emergency plan acts as a guide.

I researched templates for emergency preparedness plans for farms, especially with animals and there are not many out there. Our clinic has them listed on our website, www.waupunvet.com, on the homepage under "Emergency Protocols" and on our Facebook page. There are three templates and an overview PDF you can review.

Here is a brief list of points to emphasize from Brenda.

- Human safety is paramount. The plan needs to be written with safety as the number one objective. Mike could have been electrocuted. Brenda almost stepped in front of a telehandler and almost got run over.
- There needs to be a boss, or at least a boss for different projects, but really one main boss. When 50 people show up, chaos ensues,

unless there are people with specific jobs assigned. The boss can assign projects to assistants, and people showing up can then be assigned to groups under the assistant. The Elsinger family is somewhat unique because each partner has areas of the farm that they oversee. They were able to each go in their own direction, but in most cases, one person needs to be the incident commander.

- A designated parking area with a sign-in sheet promotes accountability and safety.
- Brenda brought up putting the emergency plan on phones. She's spot on with this suggestion. It doesn't help to have it in a file drawer in a burning office.
- Where are your cows going to go? This is huge. Brenda moved 250 milk cows. Where would 1,000 cows go? If you don't have a parlor, what are you going to do? Brenda made the point that this boils down to relationships with other large farms and the overall community. Trucking is also part of this. Who can move your cows?

Relationships are important. Grande's field staff was there immediately and checking on the state regulations on shipping. The veterinary clinic jumped in to help that night. The fire department visits the Elsinger farm occasionally to help train new volunteers about what a large dairy is like. People in a rural community will step in if they know you. It's one of the reasons I love living here. In Chicago everyone would show up and loot.

Think about this...

Before you comment on a post, any post on social media, if there is any potential controversy, take a breath. Stop and make sure you know all the facts. Could there be something you don't know about the situation? Now, wait 24 hours and decide if you still really want to comment.

Assume that everything you say in public is being recorded. Everything you do outside of your bedroom, or at least your house, is on video. This is especially important if you are like me and you have a temper.