Horses and Floods
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At the time of writing, on the 14 January, much of Queensland is still underwater (although thankfully the water is now receding in most areas) and some other States are experiencing floods or are at risk of flooding. More extreme weather is predicted for various States so horse owners have lots to think about in terms of preparing their property in case of flooding and after care of their properties if such an event occurs.

EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS
What are some of the things that you can do to help your horses and your property in extreme weather such as floods and storms?

Obviously if the extreme weather comes suddenly and without warning - as it did for many people in Toowoomba and the Lockyer Valley - there is nothing you can do apart from trying to keep yourself and your family safe. For many more people the January floods came more steadily – but surely.

Any property with grazing animals should have escape routes within the property or to a neighbour’s property that is situated on higher ground.

This means that a paddock, as well as having a gate for everyday use which is positioned in the most logical place for moving horses around on a daily basis, may need a second gate which is situated at the highest part of the paddock.

Gates leading to higher ground should not be locked, or if they are, keys etc. should be easily accessible, and perhaps a spare set kept with you neighbours in case you are not around.

Never position yards where horses are kept, near creeks. Apart from the good environmental management reasons, in a flood situation, water may rise quickly trapping the horses within the yard, and will leave them with no escape route.

You need to work out which way the animals will move if flood water enters the paddock and the horses (or other animals) are enclosed inside. Be aware of gullies or low lying areas which may fill first preventing the horses accessing safer areas. What would be regarded as a logical way to go to us is not necessarily so for horses.

If your house is built on the highest point of your land you can design your property so that gates allow animals to move towards the house area. In our seminars we describe a system that we call “The Central Point System” which means that horses have free access from the paddocks to a communal area for drinking water and feed. Horses can be easily encouraged to bring themselves to this area, and provided it is on high ground, this would work well in a flood situation. The animals can get themselves out of paddocks and to higher ground even if you are not there.

TRAINING
Make sure your horses are well handled and trained to be easy to load in case they need to be evacuated by either yourself or rescue services/ neighbours.

AFTER A FLOOD... HOLD YOUR HORSES
If your land has been under water, you need to be careful about turning horses out again too soon. Even if you have not been flooded as such but have just had large amounts of rain fall on your land, there is no point in turning horses out on to saturated land if you have a choice. This will just result in degraded land as animals walk or stand around on wet soil. Again, if you have a high and dry area, keep the horses there, and feed hay until your land has had time to recover.

Before turning horses out on to flood affected paddocks you need to check them for any debris that may have washed on to the land and could cause injury. You also need to walk the fence lines and check to see if there is any damage to fences. Particularly check low lying areas where water will have been moving faster.

Any water sources on your property such as dams or watering points are likely to have become polluted by the flood water, check, and if necessary clean and flush out before allowing horses access. Even the grass may contain pollutants, so monitor initial grazing periods, for a period after the water has subsided. This is another reason to hold your horses for a while. If possible let several fresh rain events occur which will help to ‘clean’ the plants.

As your pasture recovers from any flood you may see weeds that you did not have previously. You need to identify these weeds and get on top of them as soon as possible. Depending on your situation and the severity of the flood you may have inherited silt/soil. This may not be a bad thing depending on how deep it is and whether you actually needed it. If the silt/soil has completely covered your old pasture now may be the time to reseed with more desirable grasses as the silt/soil will act as a mulch, covering the old pasture, and provide a medium for new plants to grow at the same time.

BE PREPARED
There are several websites that have information and fact sheets about horses and floods/storms, as well as many other emergency situations, such as the Department of Primary Industries (DPI), the Queensland Horse Council (QHC) www.qldhorsecouncil.com.

Make sure you take the time to browse them, draw up an emergency plan, and make any changes necessary. It is better to be prepared.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Jane Myers is the author of Managing Horses on Small Properties, Horse Safe, and co-author of Horse Sense. She regularly speaks at conferences and conducts workshops. Her work and website, aim to promote responsible horse ownership through education and a commitment to ongoing learning. Visit www.equiculture.com.au.