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FIRE SAFETY IN HORSE BARN



Most barn fires are preventable. We hang up a "no smoking" sign and figure we've done all we can to protect our horses and barns. Fire prevention begins with an understanding of how fire starts and keeps burning. Just as we need oxygen, so does a fire, and in approximately the same amounts. The air we breathe is twenty-one percent oxygen. If the level of oxygen should fall below sixteen percent, there is not enough oxygen to support life, nor is there enough to support combustion. Our barns, usually designed to provide good ventilation, will permit a continuous supply of oxygen to a fire.

Knowing fire-propagation requirements enables you to minimize chances for a fire to start, so if you are planning to construct a new barn, fire prevention should begin with the initial sketches. Don't take for granted that your architect or professional barn builder or general contractor will be familiar with fire safety codes and construction requirements as they apply to stables - they should, but many, especially small local barn builders, don't.

All barns, regardless of size, should have a minimum of two exits, both of which are easily accessible and have no impediments to their immediate use. That is, don't allow doorways or isles to become storage areas; doors should never be blocked. The common rule for the number of exits is: up to 12 horses, 2 exits; 12-24 horses, 3 exits; 24-36 horses, 4 exits and 35-50 horses, 5 to 6 exits. Ideally, these means of egress should allow you to lead a horse into the isle way and then directly to the outside in a straight line.

For those of us who have "inherited" our barns, there is much we can do to minimize errors in design. Fire prevention, for the most part, consists of practices, that is, the things we do on a day-to-day basis to maintain a fire-safe building. Knowing fire propagation requirements will help you to keep an eye out for possible hazards.



Fire Safety

- Obviously, the most common source of heat is an open flame-a match. Stringently enforce the no smoking rule, not just by posting signs, but by firmly telling a smoker to refrain. There are no safe smoking areas in a barn.
- Cleanliness in the barn requires minimal effort if you keep up with it, and maintaining a clean barn is excellent fire protection. Get rid of cobwebs hanging from the rafters; cobwebs provide excellent pathways along which flame can travel- so quickly that in seconds fire will have spread from one end of the barn to the other. Flaming pieces of cobwebs falling into stall will start new fires. Keep loose hay and straw swept up, and if you have hay drops, don't permit loose hay to hang over the edges; like cobwebs, flaming bits of hay can drop though and start other fires.
- Bacterial and chemical actions are blamed for a great many fires, particularly those where it is determined that the fire started in a stack of hay. The best preventive measure for spontaneous ignition is to not accept any load of hay that is not completely cured, since during the curing process heat is generated. Clover and alfalfa hay seem to be particularly prone to incomplete curing, and first-cutting alfalfa is often subject to this problem. In a stack of uncured hay two fire propagation requirements - fuel and heat- are at work. The only thing lacking in sufficient quantity is oxygen. The hay may smolder unnoticed for quite some time before the edge of the stack is reached. When that happens, and oxygen is suddenly available in abundance and there is a means for the generated heat to escape, you have a full-blown fire on your hands.
- Misuse of electricity is another major cause of fires. All electrical wiring should be enclosed in conduit; it is probably a requirement of your city's building code. If you are planning a barn, locate your incoming electric supply away from any doorways so a fire occurring at the main panel will not make an exit unusable.
- Lightning rods are your best protection against Mother Nature's electricity.
- The major concern with electricity on a day-to-day basis, is with portable appliances. Kerosene heaters, electric heaters, and infrared lights, are the biggest single cause of barn fires today.

Surveying the fire scene only takes a fraction of a second, but is the single most important step to ensure everyone's safety.

Fire prevention cannot be neglected outside the barn. Destroy weeds growing close to the barn and keep all pastures mowed to lessen the danger of brush fires. If your pastures front on a road, it's a good idea to leave a barren strip about fifteen feet in width to guard against fires resulting from carelessly tossed cigarettes.

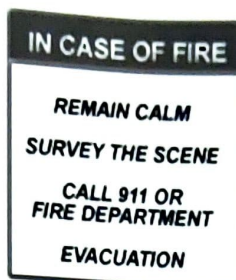
Gasoline-powered vehicles should be stored away from the barn, but it is necessary to keep them close by, they should be parked a minimum of fifteen feet away from any structures housing animals. Farm equipment and trailers, also, should be parked some distance from the

barn so that debris does not collect behind equipment. It's amazing how many items can be "stored" under or behind seldom used farm equipment. Those items provide excellent fuel.

- It's frightening to consider that a fire might start when no one is home or near the barn, so an alerting system tied through phone lines to a monitoring station can bring great peace of mind. The fire department will be notified immediately, even if you are unavailable.
- An intercom system can be helpful when you are at home. What you will hear is sounds of "could be" horse difficulty, intruders, frightened neighs. An intercom system doesn't have to be elaborate or expensive. It is a valuable instrument for "seeing" your barn when you're in your house.
- Fire suppression - the action taken to extinguish a fire- is often limited in barns because of the high combustibility level of the contents and because as soon as the fire department is notified, evacuation must proceed if it is not already underway. Portable fire extinguishers are a must in a barn and they should be of the ABC type. The range and time of effectiveness in the use of a fire extinguisher is relatively short, however, they may be the device that at least contains the fire until help arrives.
- Post written emergency information at each phone. This information should include written directions to the facility and a list of commonly kept combustibles.
- If you do have a barn fire, don't put yourself or someone else in danger. Think about your actions first.

An evacuation plan should be discussed with all horse handlers in your barn. They should be familiar with the barn layout and should practice walking from each stall to the nearest exit. Horses must be led out in case of fire or, confused, will attempt to return to their stalls. Beside each stall door hang the occupants halter with a lead rope snapped to it; the middle of a fire is no time to be hunting for equipment. Ideally, horses should be led some distance away and securely tied.

Your own fire department can assist you with guidance and information. Contact the officer responsible for fire prevention and ask him or her to help you in evaluating your barn's fire safety level. If you belong to a riding club, 4-H Group, or operate a training facility, consider asking your fire prevention officer to speak at your next meeting or clinic. The office will be glad to do so, and it may be the most profitable equine information you'll ever receive.



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For More Information Call:

C. Jarvis Insurance Agency
33755 Station Street
Solon, Ohio 44139

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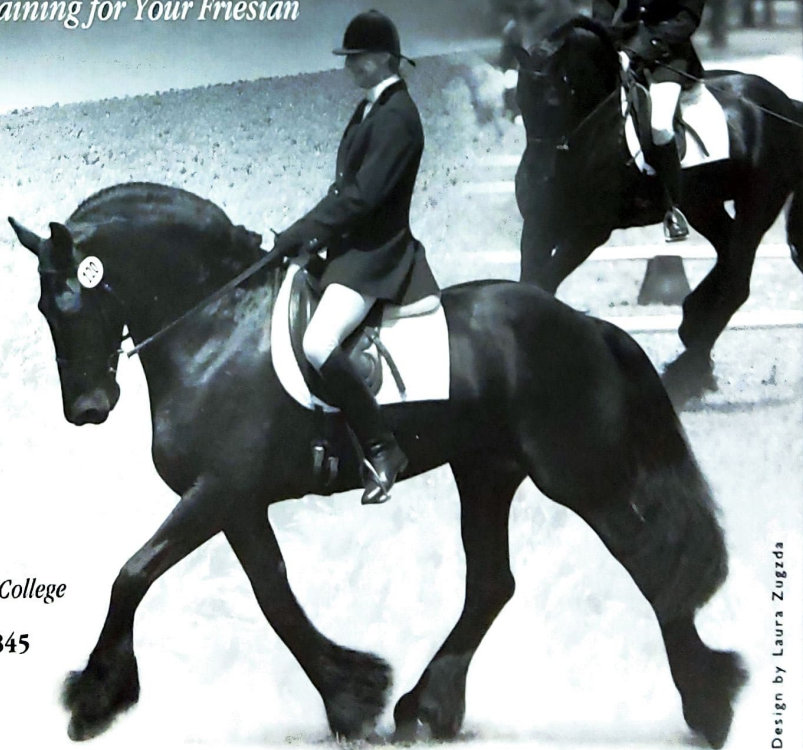
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