

HELL OR HIGH WATER

In the world of ranching, cattlemen and women who call Florida home learn to tackle the biggest problems Mother Nature can throw their way.

by Megan Silveira

Across the country, many Americans wake up to a similar routine. They comb their hair, brush their teeth and get dressed for the day. And, most Americans, work from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. before coming home to an evening of relaxation with their families.

But cattlemen and women do not follow this routine. Cows do not calve on an 8-to-5 schedule, freshly weaned calves don't wait until the sun comes up to start bawling and Mother Nature never clocks out.

While agriculturalists everywhere know all this, ranchers in the state of Florida are certainly familiar with working from sunup to long after sundown. With the unique weather conditions of this state, ranchers in Florida have to deal with a natural disaster most people, let alone cattle

breeders, are not familiar with — hurricanes.

Craig Finley of Finley Brothers Cattle Company, Tallahassee, Fla., describes hurricanes as a collection of “high winds and heavy, heavy rains.” Finley compares the storms to a donut, saying the weather will hit bad before giving a nice break and hitting again.

“If you’ve never been in a hurricane, you’d never imagine how much rain comes down,” Finley says. While he says the government issues hurricane warnings before the storms hit land, 18-24 inches (in.) of rain can fall in the days before, during and after the storm.

From spring through fall, Finley says the main concerns coming with these types of storms are the intense levels of rain and trees falling due to the saturated ground and loosened root systems.



THE CALM BEFORE

Finley's best advice for ranchers in hurricane country is to have a preparedness plan. He says the plan should be written down, communicated with all staff members and reviewed frequently.

"Hurricanes don't sneak up on you," Finley says. "You usually have three to four days warning, so if you've done a good job early on, you've got a little bit of time."

Safety should be the main component of an operation's crisis plan, Finley says. And this concept stretches beyond a ranch's fences. Finley says with hurricanes, ranchers also have to think of the community surrounding their property.

With wet ground and high winds, falling debris and trees are a big concern during hurricanes. These hazards lead to downed fences and loose

cattle, a problem for ranchers and the public.

He believes staff members, cattle and the traveling public all fall under the umbrella he labels "safety" in an operation's hurricane preparedness plan. Finley says ranchers should be ready to deal with the threat both the storm and loose cattle pose.

Facilities should be the next area of concern in a plan. Finley urges ranchers to only build structures capable of withstanding high winds. He also says trees should be managed throughout the year to help prevent damage from loose or falling limbs during the actual storm.

"Forage and water are critical for cattle," Finley says. He emphasizes the importance of stockpiling forage, feed and minerals in the months before the prime hurricane season.

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Having the proper piping and alternate electricity sources will help ensure ranchers have a way of providing their livestock with fresh water during the storm. In addition to stockpiling forage, Finley says a good hurricane crisis plan should include potentially moving cattle to safety.

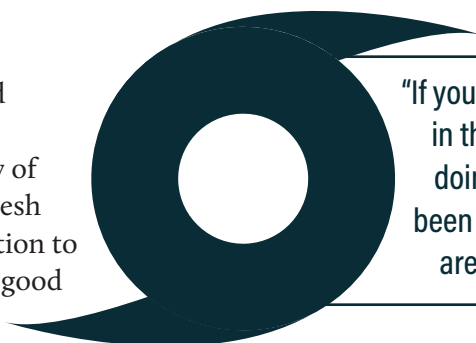
During a typical storm, cattle should be able to lay down and weather the wind and rain. They will need to be in a pasture with high ground and minimal trees or electrical poles. An ideal location would also be easily accessible by ranchers after the storm has passed through.

The final step Finley suggests is a health strategy for their herd, a step he says operations sometimes overlook, unfortunately.

“You want to be as self-sufficient as possible during that time in case a veterinarian can’t get to you,” he adds.

With at least an annual review of the crisis plan and constant communication among all levels of ranch staff, Finley says ranchers can prepare for the inevitable. While no rancher wants to experience weather like this, he says all cattlemen located in the Sunshine State need to be ready and able to manage their operations through a hurricane.

“If you’ve never been hit by a hurricane in this area, you either haven’t been doing it long enough or you haven’t been doing it often enough,” Finley says. “Hurricanes are going to come.”



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WEATHERING THE STORM

John Hill knows the truth in Finley’s statement better than anyone. Hill runs 350 cow-calf pairs in Marianna, Fla., and was a victim of Hurricane Michael that struck the state last October.

Hill describes the storm as “unreal,” saying hurricanes are typically down to the level of a tropical storm when they hit his property. But last year’s storm was a Category 4 when it hit.

“If you’ve ever seen the pictures of a war zone, that’s what it looked like,” Hill says. “Never had a hurricane hit Florida like that one, so nobody was fully prepared.”

Stockpiled feed from the spring and early summer and six wells running on just as many generators were perfect examples of how Hill says being ready for bad weather paid off for his operation.

With cattle spread out over 1,200 acres, Hill says it seemed like this large of a hurricane brought about more trouble than storms in the past. He had young cattle go missing with broken fences during the storm and many of his buildings were completely destroyed.

Despite understanding the importance of having plans in place to deal with storms, Hill says

sometimes, unfortunately, ranchers just have to wait the weather out and then work on rebuilding.

“It doesn’t matter how good your fence is. It doesn’t matter how good your house is,” he says. At the end of the day, Mother Nature still reigns supreme.

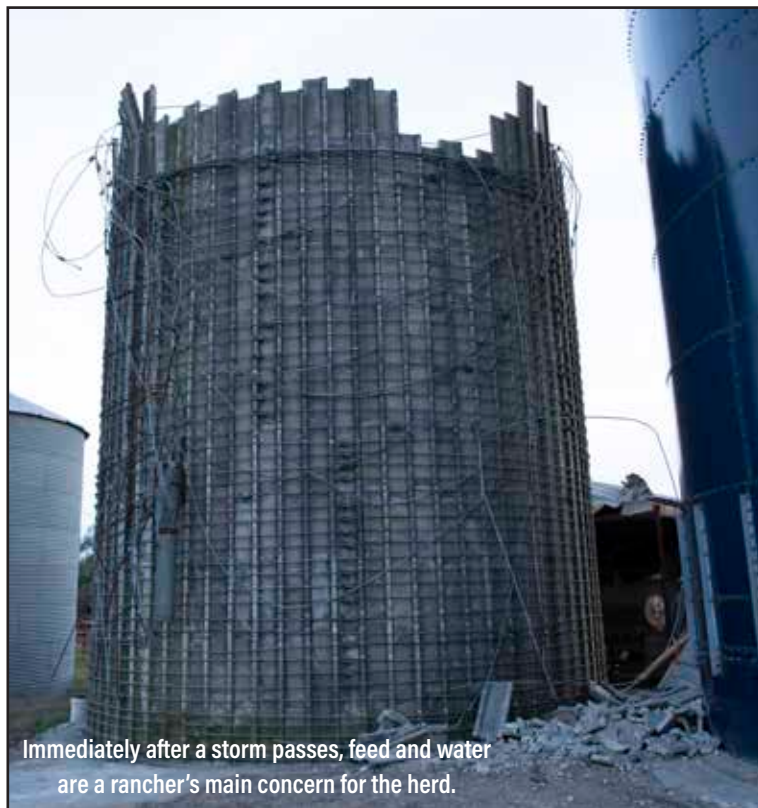
Since last October’s storm, Hill is still working on recovering. He says the first step of cleaning away debris is a time-consuming process. And the next step of actually rebuilding, both fences and facilities, takes even longer.

But, through the dark clouds of the storm come the first rays of sunlight. Hill says the support his area received after the storm was incredible. Neighboring ranchers collected loose cattle for other operations immediately after the hurricane hit.

Cattlemen’s associations sent out help for local ranchers, jump starting the recovery process for many in the area. Others that had no connection to the cattle industry came to help with the cleaning and rebuilding process.

Even as ranchers across the U.S. clock more hours than consumers are often aware of, operations in Florida are faced with challenges unique to their area.

But with a passion for the cattle industry in their hearts, come hell or high water, these cattlemen and women of the Sunshine State will continue to persevere and work long after the sun goes down. **AJ**



Immediately after a storm passes, feed and water are a rancher’s main concern for the herd.



Though Florida is accustomed to plentiful rainfall, an approaching hurricane far exceeds the normal amount and makes the ground too soggy to support large roots.

PHOTOS BY BECKY MILLS