



Hurricanes Wreak Havoc

Gulf Coast cattlemen face long-term recoveries following back-to-back hurricanes.

by *Boyd Kidwell*

Wes Parker, Wiggins, Miss., sounds drained as he talks about the damage Hurricane Katrina dealt his Gulf Coast Angus operation and the long recovery ahead. On one hand, Parker is thankful that his family and their purebred cows are safe. But, he knows cattle producers and rural residents of Mississippi, Louisiana and east Texas face a tough road back to anything like their previous normal lives.

"I've got two miles of fence up and two miles down. There's so much to do that I don't know where to start. But, we'll get through it with a lot of people helping each other," Parker says.

Back-to-back hurricanes Katrina and Rita destroyed fences, polluted livestock water, damaged pastures and ruined feed supplies. In the hardest-hit areas, thousands of cows were killed, most of the fences were damaged, and all of the barns were destroyed.

Parker's WP Farms is a purebred Angus operation in Stone County, about 30 miles from the ocean. He reports that he didn't lose any animals during the hurricane, and very few cows were killed in his area. However, hundreds of cattle were reported lost close to the Mississippi coast.

In Louisiana's marshy bayous, up to 30,000 cattle were stranded, and 9,000 were missing or dead. Army helicopters helped locate stranded animals, and men

on horseback herded stray cattle into portable corrals. After the area's people were rescued, Lt. Gen. Russel Honore turned his National Guard troops into wranglers and helped Louisiana cattlemen gather up thousands of stressed cows from marshland grazing areas.

"We did OK in Lafayette Parish," says Vernal Comeaux of Cquin Angus Farm in Scott, La. "The coastal parishes took the big tidal surges, and a lot of cattle drowned. The big problem has been getting the animals fresh drinking water. Cattle can only survive five days with salt water, and then their bodies shut down."

Comeaux tried to contact his bull customers in the coastal parishes to see if they needed help. His son Zack delivered round bales of hay to the hard-hit areas.

"Calving season is beginning in this area, and the big concern now is alligators eating newborn calves. There was already a large wild alligator population and many more escaped from alligator farms in the area. Those alligators are moving into the pastures and being very aggressive," Comeaux says.

Road to recovery

Despite the hardships, cattle are being rounded up, and the beef industry is being restored along the Gulf Coast. Early assessments indicate fresh water, feed and fencing are top priorities. Animal health care, permanent fencing, emergency feed, debris removal and pasture renovation will be the keys to long-term recovery.

"We've received contributions from around the country. Most of the money is going to producers as certificates to buy fencing materials," says Sammy Blossom, Mississippi Cattlemen's Association executive vice president. "It really helps our producers to know that people from around the country are concerned and want to help."

On the other hand, Blossom reports some producers sold cattle to raise money for their families. With disaster assistance and insurance claims delayed

Lend a hand

Anyone wishing to make tax-deductible contributions to hurricane victims can contact:

- ▶ Disaster Relief Fund, National Cattlemen's Foundation, 9110 E. Nichols Ave., Suite 300, Centennial, CO 80112; (303) 694-0305.
- ▶ Katrina Relief, Mississippi Cattlemen's Foundation, 680 Monroe St., Jackson, MS 39202; misscal@bellsouth.net.
- ▶ Louisiana Disaster Fund, Louisiana Cattlemen's Foundation, 4921 Interstate 10 Frontage Rd., Port Allen, LA 70767; (225) 343-3491.
- ▶ Cattlemen's Katrina Fund, Texas Cattle Feeders Association, 5501 Interstate 40 West, Amarillo, TX 79106; info@tcfa.org.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 208

Hurricanes Wreak Havoc CONTINUED FROM PAGE 207

by red tape, cattle were one of the few quick sources of cash. Sale barns that could open after the hurricanes had a steady flow of cattle in salerings.

"We're having a number of sell-outs because facilities are devastated and people need cash to help their family's immediate needs. This hurricane will be the last straw for some people. It may take more than a year to clear up the downed trees and rebuild the fences. Recovery will be a long-term project," Blossom says.

"I hope we can save the small producers. We need them," Parker adds.

Tony Thames, an Angus breeder from Monticello, Miss., agrees. "We'll see the effects of this hurricane for years to come.

Most cattlemen in this area also lost a lot of valuable timber. Now, we'll be living with higher fertilizer and fuel costs as we recover."

Thames also works for the Farm Service Agency (FSA). He points out that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) activated the Emergency Conservation Program (ECP) to assist farmers in the area. Under ECP, USDA is providing \$20 million to help repair damaged lands. Participants will receive cost-share assistance to cover up to 75% of the cost to remove debris, restore fences and repair conservation structures. Information on the ECP is available at USDA FSA offices.

Obstacles to return

A major problem after the hurricanes was salt-water contamination of livestock drinking water. At the same time, the hurricanes were followed by weeks of hot weather that increased animals' water requirements. One of Parker's first jobs after Katrina was to repair fences and move his cattle into a pasture with a pond. His water system was rendered useless for several days when a power outage disabled the electric pump.

With many downed trees, plant poisoning was another worry. Extension specialists say consuming wild cherry and buckeye branches can sicken and kill cattle. Oak leaves and acorns are less dangerous, but if cattle consume large quantities, they should be checked regularly.

America's cattlemen quickly responded to the tragedy. The Texas Cattle Feeders Association (TCFA) donated \$25,000 to the American Red Cross to start a Hurricane Katrina Relief Fund. The South Carolina Cattlemen's Association sent truckloads of materials to fellow producers. Chain saws, electric fencing and solar fence chargers were appreciated items. The Alabama Cattlemen's Association donated \$2,500 to the Red Cross to buy beef for evacuees, \$7,500 to the Mississippi Cattlemen's Foundation and \$7,500 to the Louisiana Cattlemen's Foundation. State beef councils invested \$100,000 for shelf-stable products such as canned beef and beef jerky that were distributed to hurricane victims.

The National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) Disaster Relief Fund immediately sent 50 truckloads of donated supplies to help Gulf Coast producers.

In the first few days after Katrina, the Mississippi Cattlemen received nearly \$40,000. Contributions ranged from \$25 from a woman in Vermont to \$300 from an Iowa Extension worker. A Florida rancher sent a truckload of gate panels to make portable corrals. Donations continue to flow in from around the country.

Of course, these contributions are only a tiny amount of what will be needed to restore the area's cattle industry. But, Gulf Coast cattlemen are resilient, and they are stubbornly moving forward.

"Every day is a little brighter," Thames says.

"That's a tough bunch down there. You can bet those Cajuns will go back to raising cattle like they've always done," Comeaux says.

Are you prepared?

Fortunately, most cattlemen don't live in areas that experience direct hits by hurricanes. However, heavy rains and high winds can cause damage and power outages far away from the coast. Include potential damage from tornadoes and ice storms, and most producers have at least some chance of facing a natural disaster.

Cattle producers have a unique set of concerns during disasters. Here are some tips to help you prepare:

- ▶ **Water** — With all of the flooding, fresh drinking water is the most critical need for livestock after a hurricane. Salt water ruins most water sources, and power outages knock out electric pumps to run pasture water systems. Whether it's a hurricane or an ice storm, plan for livestock water needs. Have portable water tubs on hand and arrange for ways to fill them in case electric pumps aren't running. If temperatures are below freezing, find a way to move animals to sources of running water.
- ▶ **Fencing** — Before a storm hits, assemble all of the tools and materials needed to repair fences. Buy extra rolls of wire, T-posts and insulators to build temporary fences. Solar chargers and polytape can be used to make quick corrals or to keep animals off roads. Don't forget to have post-drivers, pliers and gloves handy.
- ▶ **Feed** — Make sure all animals have access to feed or forage in the days after a disaster. If fences are down, adequate feed keeps animals from roaming. Since transportation may become difficult, stash bales of hay around remote pastures and protect them with temporary electric fences until they're needed.
- ▶ **Fuel** — Store plenty of fuel for vehicles, generators and chain saws. You'll be surprised how much fuel it takes to run generators and equipment. Seven days after Hurricane Katrina, Mississippi rancher Wes Parker was down to his last 2 gallons of fuel. Ironically, Parker lives on Oilwell Road, but all of the gas stations in his area were out of fuel and closed.
- ▶ **Vaccines** — Figure out how to keep your vaccines stored at the recommended temperatures in case power goes off. Buy block ice or dry ice to keep vaccines cool for several days.
- ▶ **Chain saw** — Make sure you have a reliable chain saw with plenty of fuel and oil.
- ▶ **Diseases** — As cattle of different ownerships mingle in small areas to escape flooding, diseases become a major concern. Leptospirosis is one of several diseases that veterinarians warn against. Although no disease outbreaks were reported after the hurricanes, vaccinations were recommended.
- ▶ **Identification** — Each animal should have an ear tag with your name, address and phone number. Use branding or some form of permanent identification (ID) in case animals lose their ear tags.