

## Texas Wildfires Impact Horse Farms

Wildfires continue to burn or smolder in drought-plagued Texas. Since January, record-breaking dry conditions have contributed to nearly 20,000 fires that have scorched 3.67 million acres and destroyed nearly 2,500 properties.

Many fires cropped up over Labor Day weekend, triggered by powerful shifting winds from Tropical Storm Lee. As of Sept. 12, about 95 Texas wildfires were still being battled by more than 1,000 firefighters.

The largest recent wildfire is in Bastrop County, east of Austin, and has yet to be fully contained. Nearly 1,600 homes have been lost, and more than 34,000 acres have burned. Thousands have been evacuated from their homes. So far, only two people are known to have died in the Bastrop fire.

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Bastrop is home to many farms and ranches. Under evacuation orders, most of the area's livestock (including horses) were transported to safer locations, although there have been reports of missing horses and some that have perished from fire or smoke inhalation.

Dozens of farm owners from surrounding communities have taken in all kinds of livestock from evacuated properties. At Paint Creek Farm in Paige, just north of Bastrop, Claudia Knudsen runs an equine retirement/layup business. She and her staff are harboring 30 horses. In order to make room for evacuees, they've moved some of their horses to another farm Knudsen owns in North Texas.

"We've had all kinds of people, from all over, come to the farm to help us care for these horses," Knudsen said. "Everybody wants to help." Eight of the evacuees at Paint Creek were horses that miraculously survived a Bastrop barn fire while trapped in their stalls. Only one of those horses, whose hooves were severely burned, had to be put down.

"We're still doctoring some horses whose throats were burned from smoke inhalation," Knudsen said. "But they're doing better."

In the Houston area, fires have occurred in parts of three counties, from which hundreds of people and animals were evacuated. In the Montgomery County community of Magnolia, a string of large horse farms have been spared, according to trainer Peter Pletcher.

"The fires sort of surrounded us," said Pletcher, owner of the 70-acre PJP Farm, which did not require evacuation. "They evacuated everyone within five miles of us."

He added that he's received numerous offers from Houston-area horsemen and shipping companies that are standing by to quickly show up with trailers. "Everyone's being incredibly helpful," said Pletcher, who remains on bed rest as he recovers from a slipped disc.

Pauline Cook, senior equestrian consultant for the Great Southwest Equestrian Center in the Houston suburb of Katy, agreed with Pletcher. "My phone has been ringing off the wall with people volunteering to help any way they can," declared Cook, who also said the GSWEC has taken in 22 equine evacuees. "In times of crisis, horse people are just the best."

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