



Barn fires are devastating to all involved

Submitted for consideration as a Letter to the Editor or Opinion piece

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By John Maaskant, chicken farmer and chair of Farm & Food Care Ontario

There have been a lot of news stories lately about barn fires in Ontario. Without exception, the stories have been tragic and the incidents devastating to these farm families in so many ways – with the loss of animals being at the very top of that list. Often, a barn fire affects an entire community with neighbours joining together to support each other and help clean up the terrible aftermath. Economic concerns, while very real, are always secondary to the loss of farm animals that these farmers have raised and nurtured.

And it doesn't matter what type of farm animals are involved. The dairy farmer who milks his or her barn full of cows every morning and night – and knows each of their individual traits – is as emotionally affected as a pig farmer, horse owner or chicken farmer like me.

Many of the news stories of late have focused on one central theme: more needs to be done to prevent similar incidents. Ontario's farming community couldn't agree more. Work is always being done on prevention methods and on improved barn designs that are better able to withstand such threats. But even with the best contingency planning, no amount of precaution will ever entirely rule out the chance that a fire may start.

Unfortunately, installing sprinkler systems also isn't a workable solution in many cases although that idea has been suggested often lately. Farms generally source their water from wells with pumps that require electricity. If power is turned off to the barn to fight the fire, the wells and water supply would no longer operate.

Barn fires can be one of the most challenging things that first responders can face. Arriving at a structural barn fire with animals poses unique challenges. These can be large structures in rural areas with no access to fire hydrants or a continuous supply of water for firefighting. Many first responders are not familiar with barn design or animal handling, making the scene even more dangerous and challenging than a typical structure fire. Add to this the fact that barns contain feed and bedding materials that are flammable (and pose potential risks not found in residential homes) and the result is almost never good – a barn can be completely engulfed in less than six minutes - in a rural setting this means the barn is usually fully engulfed when the fire department arrives.

Over the last 10 years, Ontario farmers have helped to pay for and deliver training to over 1,000 first responders (including police and firefighters) on emergency responses to barn fires and accidents involving livestock. Many rural fire departments, staffed with volunteer firefighters, are also organizing barn fire education programs for their responders so that they better understand how barns in their coverage area are built and the types of livestock found within. These programs also offer the opportunity for farmers in their region to highlight potential risks.

Every barn built in Canada must meet the standards outlined in the National Farm Building Code of Canada. These regulations continue to be updated and reviewed nationally. Ultimately education, risk prevention and diligence are the keys to preventing barn fires from starting in the first place.

While the number of barn fires in Ontario has actually decreased in recent years, according to the Office of the Fire Marshal, the recent incidents have highlighted to everyone how devastating these situations can be. The headlines also serve as a constant reminder to farmers to review their fire prevention plans.

Through coordinated efforts and awareness we can continue to reduce the risk of barn fires impacting Ontario farms and farmers.

A library of resources on how to prevent barn fires and other livestock emergencies is housed online on the Farm & Food Care Ontario website at www.farmfoodcare.org

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J Maaskant', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

John Maaskant, chicken farmer, Chair of Farm & Food Care Ontario

Clinton, Ontario

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