

Burial is best for animal mortalities from fire

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Animal deaths occurring during the wildfires that swept through much of the Rolling Plains and Central Texas over the Easter weekend may best be handled by burial, according to a Texas AgriLife Extension Service engineer.

Nearly two dozen wildfires raced across the state on April 9-10, burning more than 100,000 acres – including two entire towns in Montague County – and killing at least three people. By April 11, more than 150,000 acres had been burned, according to the Texas Forest Service.

AgriLife Extension personnel are working with county judges and Farm Service Agency personnel to get an accurate estimate of the agricultural losses.

In the meantime, on-ranch or on-farm burial is the quickest way to dispose of non-diseased animal mortalities, said Dr. Saqib Mukhtar, AgriLife Extension agricultural engineer.

Trenches should be dug in areas where the highest seasonal water table is below (at least 2 feet) the bottom of the trench and the trench bottom should be compacted or lined with clay (if possible) to control leaching of fluids from the carcasses, Mukhtar said.

Personal safety of workers digging trenches and disposing carcasses needs to be considered at all times, he warned.

Some other tips include:

- Do not bury or leave carcasses in flood prone, low lying areas or in sandy/highly permeable soils.
- Records of where and how many cattle were buried should be kept.
- The burial trench should not be near water supply wells, creeks, ponds, and streams.
- The trench should be covered and mounded with soil to shed rainwater.
- The mound should be inspected later and rebuilt if collapsed.

In the case of badly burned or disintegrating carcasses, Mukhtar said, an absorbent such as soil, sawdust, wood shavings, compost or spent horse bedding should be added to the non-intact carcasses before they are removed and taken to a burial site for disposal with a front-end loader or other similar bucket loader or dozer.

Do not move carcasses into a ditch while awaiting final burial, Mukhtar warned. A staging area may be set-up at a site that will not allow water to run onto to the temporarily stored carcasses or run off from the carcass storage area. Temporarily stored carcasses should be properly disposed of within 72 hours of death.

“You may need to berm the staging areas, if run-on or runoff (water) is expected,” he said.

The site should have a compacted bottom, preferably a compacted rock-base or an existing concrete pad, Mukhtar said. The surface should be covered with 12 to 18 inches of wood shavings, sawdust, cotton gin trash, compost, spent horse bedding or any other material that will absorb and contain liquids from carcasses.

The carcasses should then be placed over this layer and completely blanketed with the same absorbing material or soil, he said. The staging area should be fenced off or protected in some way from scavengers.

“Again, worker safety and record keeping – where and how many carcasses, if counting is possible – are important considerations,” Mukhtar said. “Temporary disposal is just that, and a proper disposal option will be to compost, properly bury on site or send to a Type I landfill. Please check with the landfill whether they accept animal mortalities or not.”

More on burial and composting, as well as other mitigation and recovery information, is available at [Texas Extension Disaster Education Network](#).

Mukhtar said the key is for individuals who are trying to bury a few animals to stay in compliance with the Texas Commission on [Environmental Quality regulations](#).

A sample affidavit giving a description of the number of carcasses and a general description of the burial location is available from the commission. The commission’s approved Affidavit of Facts or an affidavit providing a description of the number of carcasses and a general description of the burial location may be used.

Contact the regional Texas Commission on Environmental Quality office that serves your county or their central office at 512-239-0436 for assistance obtaining these documents.

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