Good planning can help recover from tornado, wind damage

Nearly every year in the upper Midwest a number of unfortunate farm families experience the destructive forces associated with tornadoes or high winds. In a matter of minutes, these storms can damage or destroy homes, livestock buildings, storage buildings, windbreaks, and grain handling systems that took generations to establish.

Individual reactions to these kinds of losses vary, but many people experience shock and extreme stress, say Larry Jacobson, Kevin Janni, and Bill Wilcke, engineers with the University of Minnesota Extension Service. People need time to go through a grieving process, they say. Even though there is a tendency to repair, rebuild, replant, and get on with life as soon as possible, the time shortly following a devastating loss is probably not ideal for making important, long-term decisions.

Following a disaster when immediate personal and family needs are taken care of, the farm family and the volunteers who are helping them can start making provisions for caring for livestock and for preventing further loss to salvageable feed, grain and equipment. It might be best to avoid making irreversible decisions. Instead, the engineers suggest trying to do things that will buy time to do the planning and information gathering necessary for making long-term decisions. The engineers offer these examples:

- Instead of immediately deciding to sell the dairy cows after the parlor is destroyed, it may be possible to place the cows on other dairy farms temporarily.
- Rather than immediately rebuilding a damaged swine finishing building on the old foundation, consider erecting hoop houses or adapting other solid floor buildings. In situations where storm damage is widespread, it might be difficult to get materials and builders right away, so using simple facilities that you can construct yourself might make the most sense.
- Instead of immediately selling grain from a damaged bin at a low price, perhaps it could be stored at a neighbor's farm for a few months.

After immediate needs are met and initial clean-up is completed, it is time to start thinking about the future and making longer-term decisions. This might be a good opportunity to reassess family goals. If the family decides that they are quite satisfied with the farm operation and quality of life that they had before the storm, they can start rebuilding a similar type of operation.

But if the previous operation had some shortcomings and quality of life goals were not being met, it could be time to make some changes to part or all of the operation. Here is a long list of questions that might be asked during the planning process:

- For families who raised animals, did you really enjoy working with animals? Would you rather quit raising animals, or perhaps start raising a different kind of animal?
- If you had an operation that required lots of labor, would you rather rebuild a more automated system that requires less labor? Or, if you had an expensive, automated system, are you willing to replace it
with a less expensive system that requires more labor and management? Are you interested in switching from confinement to a pasture-based system, or vice versa?

- Are there problems with the current farmstead site (environmental problems, not enough space, poor traffic problems) and would it be better to start over at a new site?
- Was the windbreak in the right position relative to driveways, buildings and feedlots? 2 of 3)
- Should facilities be repaired or completely replaced? (In general, if repairs to damaged facilities cost more than two-thirds the cost of new facilities, it's probably better to tear down the old facilities and build new ones.)
- Were the old facilities in the right place, or would it be better to put them in a new spot?
- Were the old facilities the right size, or is it time to expand or to down-size?
- Were you satisfied with the old manure handling system, or is it time to switch to a new system that is more convenient or less expensive or more environmentally sound?
- Was the old feeding system appropriate? Could you switch from dry grain to high-moisture grain or more forage? Would bunker silos be a good replacement for tower silos, or vice versa?
- Did your old grain handling system provide the quality, capacity and energy efficiency you'd like? Would a different type of grain drying and cooling work better?

Many of these questions are difficult to answer, so take your time and gather as much information as you can. Visit other farms, contact Extension personnel and other information providers, get bids from several contractors, and consider hiring consultants. A $500 to $1,000 investment for planning services could save you lots of headaches and thousands of dollars in the long run.

Midwest Plan Service (MWPS) publications are a good source of general planning information for farmsteads, livestock facilities and grain handling systems. A catalog of MWPS publications can be obtained from the University of Minnesota Biosystems and Agricultural Engineering Department, Attn: MWPS, 219 BioAgEng, 1390 Eckles Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55108, telephone (612) 625-9733 or the University of Wisconsin Biological Systems Engineering Department, 460 Henry Mall, Madison, WI 53706, telephone: (608) 262-3310.