A series of topical waves off shore has me thinking of how to be better prepared this hurricane season. We can learn lessons from Mother Nature and minimize impacts to our home and family. Animals need shelter, food, water and space to survive. We need the same things.

Having a safe and secure home is important for people and animals. Some animals abandon their homes and move to other locations when air pressure changes or fires approach. You may need to do the same.

Don’t wait until a watch or warning is issued to assess and address your risk. Learn how hurricanes develop to know when to stay or go. It is usually better to stay in a safe concrete block home with shutters and a properly attached roof or get out of the area.

Contact the engineering department in your community to find out your risk of flooding. Ask neighbors who have been around a while how your neighborhood did during the 2004 hurricane season.

Mobile homes, manufactured homes and boat houses are at severe risk during high winds. Plan where you will go now so you have time to make arrangements. Storm rooms or safe rooms can be built attached to or adjacent to homes to provide a more secure place to ride out a tornado or hurricane. FEMA has specific construction guidelines. Local businesses can build on site or in some cases, bring the shelter in with a crane. One company has a pre-fabricated unit that bolts together onto a reinforced concrete slab. They are on display at some of the UF/IFAS county extension offices.

Many hotels and local emergency shelters do not take pets so call ahead. Contact family and friends in other parts of the state or country to make alternative living arrangements when storms are on their way. Allow plenty of time to get there. Don’t wait until a mandatory evacuation order is issued as traffic will be horrible and fuel limited.

Local shelters are areas of last resort. Even though there are multiple potential shelter locations in our county, shelter openings are only announced when they are open to be sure they are safe at the time of a disaster event. While they try to be accommodating, resources are stretched and they are not very comfortable or spacious. You should be self contained and bring your own bedding, chair, medicine, food, water and activities. You may only be allotted the space equivalent to a lawn chair. A shelter is available for family members with special needs such as oxygen and medical assistance. Check with Osceola County Emergency Services to register.

Once winds are over 45 miles per hour, it is not safe to pull trailers so plan far ahead when moving with campers or hauling horses and livestock to safer areas.

As you assess your risks of disaster, think of different situations that make you vulnerable. Wind, water and fire are some of the common problems here. Once you know your risks, reduce or mitigate them as best you can. Sandbags are available to help protect against flooding when water is a problem. Shutters or wind resistant windows help reduce damage during hurricanes.

Do your best to protect your shelter, then be sure you have good insurance. Talk to your insurance agent about flood insurance, replacement cost, code coverage and other complicated insurance issues. It
is worth evaluating your homeowner’s insurance policy every year. Contact Laura Royer, UF/IFAS Osceola County Extension faculty in housing and finance for more information and pitfalls to avoid.

Some animals depend on others for survival. Gopher tortoises dig burrows into well drained sandy soils to make a cool den which protects them from the heat of summer. Researchers have found more than 300 different organisms occupy this space which is a safe haven for many creatures during a fire.

Often, in times of disaster, neighbors share resources and help each other. Younger folks help the elderly hang shutters before an approaching storm. The one with power from a backup generator makes coffee for others left in the dark. Those with chain saws help clear debris. Thawed foods become a shared community meal.

When animals get stressed, they are more likely to get sick or mean. Planning can help reduce stress and help you stay healthy. Prepare a disaster kit with food, water, medicines and personal supplies. Also pack some repair and cleanup items for after the disaster.

Prepare a family communication plan. Identify a family or friend out of the area as a central contact point. Be sure all of your friends and family know in advance who this is. You stay in contact with this person and all others contact them for your latest updates.

More disaster preparedness tips are available online at our website http://SolutionsForYourLife.com. In addition, we have provided much information in the new KUA Osceola Hurricane Guide. Information is available online in English and Spanish at http://kua.com/hurricane

Planning ahead and communication are tools to help avoid stress during many situations including preparing for disasters. If you analyze risks and prepare for the unexpected, you are better equipped to think clearly, make informed decisions, and use reason and logic when approaching complicated problems.

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