



Fire Prevention Is a Team Effort: Partner with Your Local Fire Department

Fire is one of the most serious threats facing Georgia's agricultural industry. Farms, cotton gins, grain facilities, packinghouses, greenhouses, equipment shops, poultry houses, and other agricultural businesses often contain everything a fire needs to spread quickly: combustible dust, debris, hay, fuel, chemicals, wood, plastics, electrical equipment, and machinery that generates heat.

Many agricultural operations are also located in rural areas where emergency response may take longer, and water supplies to fight fires may be limited. For these reasons, fire prevention cannot begin when smoke is already in the air. It requires planning, training, regular inspections, and coordination with the people who will respond during an emergency.

One of the best fire-prevention resources available to an agricultural business may be its local fire department.

Invite the Fire Department Before an Emergency

Do not let the first-time firefighters visit your property be during an actual fire. Contact the local fire department and invite its representatives to tour the operation. A pre-incident visit allows firefighters to learn the layout of the property, identify major hazards, and discuss how an emergency response would be handled.

During the tour, show firefighters the locations of:

- Fuel tanks, propane tanks, and chemical storage
- Electrical disconnects, gas shutoffs, and emergency stops
- Pesticides, fertilizers, and Safety Data Sheets
- Fire extinguishers and fire-protection systems
- Wells, ponds, hydrants, and other available water sources
- Grain bins, silos, cotton storage, hay barns, and confined spaces
- Employee gathering areas and emergency access routes

Many places may have narrow roads, locked gates, soft ground, low power lines, bridges with weight restrictions, or equipment blocking access. Identifying these problems in advance gives the business an opportunity to correct them before fire trucks and other emergency vehicles need to enter the property.

Businesses should also make sure the correct physical address is clearly posted and visible from the road, especially at night. If the mailing address does not lead responders directly to the worksite, discuss the best way to identify the property when calling 911.

Ask How the Department Can Help

The assistance available will vary depending on the department's staffing, resources, and policies. However, many fire departments may be willing to help businesses with several important activities.

Firefighters may conduct a walkthrough and point out concerns related to emergency access, combustible storage, ignition sources, evacuation routes, and water availability. They may also help create a pre-incident plan that documents important hazards and provides responders with information they will need during an emergency.

Some departments may offer or assist with fire-extinguisher training. Employees need to understand the different types of extinguishers, where they are located, and when their use may be appropriate. Just as importantly, workers must recognize when a fire is too large or dangerous to fight. An employee should never become trapped or delay evacuation while attempting to extinguish a fire.

The department may also participate in evacuation drills, explain how to report an emergency, review employee gathering points, and observe whether emergency vehicles can reach critical areas. Depending on local capabilities, firefighters may provide instruction on Stop the Bleed, first aid, burn response, chemical emergencies, or other emergency-preparedness topics.

A fire department may also help evaluate water supply concerns. This is especially important for rural agricultural operations that are not located near a municipal hydrant. Firefighters may want to identify ponds, wells, dry hydrants, or other potential water sources. Business owners should not assume a water source is suitable; the responding department should determine whether it can be safely and effectively used.

Help Firefighters Understand Agricultural Hazards

Agricultural fires may expose emergency responders to hazards they do not encounter at every commercial property. They have to fight cotton seed fires differently than a house fire. Grain bins and silos may create engulfment, explosion, and confined-space hazards. Fertilizers, pesticides, fuels, compressed gas cylinders, batteries, and other materials can produce toxic smoke or dangerous reactions.

Livestock can create additional complications during evacuation. Solar panels and battery systems may remain energized even when other electrical power has been disconnected. Tractors, combines, balers, dryers, and other machines may contain fuel, hydraulic oil, hot surfaces, or stored mechanical energy.

Business owners and employees know their operations better than anyone. Sharing this information with firefighters before an emergency can help them select safer tactics and avoid unexpected hazards.

Employees Still Play a Critical Role

Coordination with the fire department does not replace the business's responsibility to prevent fires. Employees should keep combustible materials away from ignition sources, promptly clean accumulations of dust and lint, inspect electrical cords and equipment, follow hot-work procedures, and report/fix leaking fuel or damaged wiring.

Machinery should be maintained according to the manufacturer's recommendations. Bearings, belts, motors, and electrical components should be monitored for overheating. Smoking should be permitted only in designated areas, and exits, fire extinguishers, electrical panels, and access roads should never be blocked.

Workers must know how to sound the alarm, call 911, shut down equipment when it can be done safely, evacuate, and report to the designated gathering point. Supervisors should account for all employees, contractors, and visitors without allowing anyone to reenter the building.

Build the Relationship Now

Georgia's fire service includes both career and volunteer departments, and their capabilities can differ considerably. Begin by contacting the department that would respond to your location. Ask what assistance it can provide, what information it needs, and how your business can support its pre-incident planning.

Keep the relationship active by inviting firefighters back when buildings are added, operations change, chemical storage is relocated, or new hazards are introduced. Update emergency contacts and site information at least annually.

A few hours spent walking through the property with local firefighters could save valuable time during an emergency. More importantly, it may protect employees, emergency responders, livestock, equipment, and the business itself. Fire protection is strongest when the business and its local fire department prepare together, before the alarm sounds.