

How Long of an Emergency Should I Prepare For?

For a question that is so fundamental to emergency preparedness, this question is not easy to answer.

First, the question is very general. Do you mean how long should you be able to live out of your go bag, your bugout bag, your vehicle, or a fixed site like your home or a lifeboat property such as a retreat or bugout location?

Second, we cannot foretell the future. Emergency planners look to records of past emergencies and then try to predict exposure to future volatility and emergencies.

This methodology is deeply flawed because the little snippet of the past that emergency managers have data for is never long enough, so the number of hours or days FEMA has told Americans to prepare for ballooned longer as the nation experienced higher order Black Swans or events that planners failed to predict, that harmed us.

“STOCKPILE SCIENTIST” REVEALS HIS #1 PREPPING SECRET

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Managing Risk

Nassim Nicholas Taleb wrote about this his books: The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable (Taleb, 2010), and Antifragile, Things that Gain from Disorder (Taleb, 2012), two great books for anyone serious about risk. Both books are just as applicable to emergency managers, survivalists, and healthcare professionals as it is to actuaries and risk

managers, maybe more so.

The Great Turkey Problem

Taleb uses a section of Antifragile called “The Great Turkey Problem” (an adaptation of a metaphor from Bertrand Russell) to show how trying to predict future risk based on past performance can cause one to fall victim to a Black Swan. Here is a short excerpt:

“A turkey is fed for a thousand days by a butcher; every day confirms to its staff of analysts that butchers love turkeys ‘with increased statistical confidence.’ The butcher will keep feeding the turkey until a few days before Thanksgiving. Then comes that day when it is really not a very good idea to be a turkey.” (Taleb, 2012)

So, where did the turkeys go wrong? Had their data window covered a full year, they would have understood what the butcher was up to, had they survived the event, but it was too short. An economist or risk manager from FEMA would read that and say, “Well their window was simply too short.” But the real problem is that mankind sucks at predicting the future. The only way you can avoid this pitfall is to stop trying to predict the future and become antifragile and generally well prepared. I have watched “Chicken Little” survivalists fail badly at attempted predictions for 45 years or so now and it’s painful to watch. Don’t fall for it.

I am not advising you to prepare for known vulnerabilities, but fortunately, for the most part, you need more or less the same knowledge, skills, things and network to grow stronger in response to most volatility, disorder and disasters instead of being destroyed by them.

Economists

“Well, if you just put your money in the S&P 500, you can’t go wrong!” The stock market has only existed for about 100 years. It got off to a bumpy start with the Great Depression, we went off the gold standard in 1933, and then Nixon stopped backing the dollar with gold reserves in 1971, so the only thing propping up the dollar now is optimism and the financial version of mutually-assured destruction, which we barely avoided in the 2008 sub-prime mortgage crisis. The folks who are telling you the stock market is a sure bet have the most to lose if it fails, so of course they do. My advice is simple: live below your means, get out of debt and stay out, save against hard times, and don’t put all your eggs in one basket.

FEMA

Then there’s FEMA. First, they told us, “Make a 72-hour kit.” Because they thought it would take a maximum of three days to respond to city-wide emergency. It took longer than they thought. Then they told us, “Make that a 96-hour kit!” Then we had a wider-scope, higher order emergency. They bumped it up to 120 Hours.

Then Hurricane Katrina happened, and they started saying, “You could be displaced or without power for a month or more in a severe regional emergency like a big CAT 5 hurricane!” I can’t believe that was almost twenty years ago, but it appears that’s all it took for them to forget the lessons learned from Katrina, because now their website says, “Plan for an emergency that could last several days!”

Are you noticing a trend? For some reason, outside of one or two very specific military contingencies, the U.S.A. prepares for emergencies after they happen.

Don't Count on Uncle Sam

Why does the wealthiest nation on the planet have the most reactive approach to emergency preparedness? Even after WWII, emergency preparedness was never a real priority for us as a nation. But since the 1960's it has really gone downhill. We even ditched the civil defense program.

I have my suspicions about why, but for better or for worse, we don't prepare for emergencies on the same level as Switzerland, Israel, or Scandinavia ... or even Russia or China. Our subways don't have blast doors so they can serve as nuclear [fallout shelters](#). In most cases, we don't require emergency shelters of any sort in building codes. Our philosophy is, "You're on your own!"

But that doesn't bother me. First of all, I don't want to depend on the government to feed, house, educate, or defend my family, in an emergency or otherwise. To have an idea what that would look like, just look at any government program. Pick one. The U.S. government has the reverse-Midas touch. Financially, everything it touches turns to fecal matter.

Second, protecting your family is not something parents can delegate to the police or to some security company. By the time they respond, it is all over. Same deal with emergency preparedness. It's not really something you want the government to do for you. Ask anyone who visited the Superdome during Hurricane Katrina. Even if you didn't care about the loss of freedoms you have to agree to, to stay in a Red Cross Shelter or a FEMA trailer they offer far too little, far too late.

Plan for the Worst-Case Scenario

What's the worst-case scenario? I use the end of the world as we know it. I plan on rebuilding the world from scratch

focusing on production capability. If you plan on that, I think that's the best those of us of modest means can hope for. Elon Musk can work on rebuilding the world on Mars. I think not putting all our eggs in one basket is a worthy goal, but for now I'll have to stick within my circle of influence here on Earth.

So, how long would that take? How much food storage would you need? That depends on how long it would take to ramp your food production up to where you could sustain your household, right? I have heard quite a few folks tell me how they intend to till their lawn under and plant seeds from a can, so they will need a year food supply at most. And I think, "You haven't gardened much, have you?"

To have a reasonable chance of success in your first season of gardening, you need more than seeds and gardening tools. You need to already have a garden in place and a water supply. So, unless you live somewhere where there is enough natural rainfall to support agriculture, which is very rare out West, you'll need to live someplace with end-to-end gravity fed water or you'll have to dig canals, haul water, or dig a well ... something that will give you a water supply even when the power is out.

Once you have water, fruit and nut trees will give you the most calories for the least amount of work. The catch is that they take a few years to start producing. For this reason, they were the first thing planted by pioneers and their descendants. Both of my grandfathers would plant fruit trees as soon as they bought a property, and it paid off.

After the fruit trees, you need a garden and a chicken coop, rabbits, or a pond for a reliable source of protein. If you can, add beehives. However long it would take you to get enough water, fruit trees, garden, and chickens in place to feed your household, that's how much food you should store. I would plan on 2-3 years minimum and store extra for family and

friend who will inevitably come stay with you, further dividing your food supply. I wouldn't bank on a good harvest the first year, especially if you've never gardened before. Pretty much anyone can do it, but there is a learning curve.

Want to store less food? Get to work on food production. Put in a well, cisterns, a rainwater catchment and a watering system. Get your soil tested and amended. Create the garden beds. Get the fruit trees in the ground and get a chicken coop. You don't have to do it all at once but get started and stock everything you need to expand because it may not be available when the other 98% of society, who doesn't grow any of the food that they eat at all, decides to try their hand at gardening to survive.



Survival Kits for Worst-Case Scenarios

When looking at your survival gear like your Go Bag and your Bugout Bag, planning to survive the apocalypse instead of a short-term wilderness survival ordeal really affects what you include.

This causes a shift away from disposable, single use products to multi-use tools that will last. It also causes a shift from including consumables such as food and medicine and ammunition to scavenging and producing those things instead of trying to carry two or three years or more worth of food or medicine, you shift your focus to wild edibles and medicinal plants,

deep stockpiles and creating multiple caches of food and medicine that you could dig up if you got robbed or forced to flee.

You would want simpler firearms that will last a long and time and that you could reload and maybe even a few firearms that can use crude black powder you can make yourself with cast bullets and shot, and learning the skills to do that, and so on. You might also want archery equipment and to start making simple bows and arrows and to carry the tools and learn the skills that will enable you to do so. You still need food and medicine and ammunition, especially at first, to sustain you through the inevitable learning curve of adapting to a world with only small bubbles of electricity and technology.

My answer to the question is that I want my preparations to be in the long-term to permanent range. I don't think it's a worthy goal to survive or to "not die." My goal is to become antifragile, to grow stronger in response to negative stimulus, not just to not let it harm me. We will all die one day. I want to live well, rather than to simply avoid death as long as I can.

I am preparing for as long as possible depending on the circumstances. No doubt, it will take me a long time to get there. It has taken me decades to get where I am. But I am a lifelong student of survival. I don't think I'll ever decide I'm content with what I know, or stop refining my modular, layered survival kit or my stockpile and declare it finished. Nobody dies with an empty inbox. Adapting and overcoming the problems of survival and self-reliance is an important part of being a good human.