In hard times, some flirt with survivalism

Economic angst has Americans stockpiling 'beans, bullets and Band-Aids'
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SEATTLE - Atash Hagmahani is not waiting for the stock market to recover. The former high-tech professional turned urban survivalist has already moved his money into safer investments: Rice and beans, for starters.

“I hoard food,” says Hagmahani, 44, estimating that he has enough to last his family a year or two. “I’m not ashamed to admit it.”

“People keep asking when this (economic crisis) is going to clear up,” says Hagmahani, who agreed to be interviewed on the condition that he be identified only by this pseudonym, which he uses for his survivalist blog, or by his first name, Rob.

The answer, he predicts, is that the country is entering what he calls a “Greater Depression.” “Maybe they jolly well better get used to the change in lifestyle.”

Hagmahani is not alone in concluding that desperate times call for serious preparations.

With foreclosure rates running rampant, financial institutions teetering and falling, prices for many goods and services climbing, and jobs being slashed, many Americans are making preparations for worse times ahead. For some, that means cutting spending and saving more. For others, it means taking a step into survivalism, once regarded solely as the province of religious End-of-Timers, sci-fi fans and extremists.

That often manifests itself as a desire to secure basic emergency resources — what survival guru Jim Wesley Rawles describes as “beans, bullets and Band-Aids.”

Rawles, speaking by phone from an “undisclosed location” somewhere between the Cascades and the Rocky Mountains, said he has seen traffic on his Web site, SurvivalBlog.com, explode in the last year.

Getting ready for ‘TEOTWAWKI’
“There are a lot more people — a lot more eager people — who are trying to get themselves squared away logistically,” said Rawles, who lectures and writes books on preparing for and surviving “TEOTWAWKI” — The End Of The World As We Know It.

Rawles, a self-described Christian conservative, said most of his readers had similar backgrounds when he started his blog in 2005. But he said that as the financial crisis has unfolded — particularly when oil prices began to soar — he started hearing from a much broader segment of the population.

“Now it’s the entire political spectrum — far right, far left and everything in between,” said Rawles. “I’m getting over 200 e-mails from readers a day. Now it is quite apparent how many more liberals are writing. Same concerns, different outlook. Greens, for instance, put less emphasis on self-defense and guns.”

Buoyed by an industry that flourishes when others languish, his site also is attracting record advertising revenue. The offerings include “secure, off-grid” mountain retreats, firearms training, home schooling aids, gold, freeze-dried food and water filtration systems.

Long-lasting food in demand
Others more directly embedded in the survival industry say they, too, are seeing the biggest surge of orders since the run-up to Y2K, when angst surged over whether computers would survive the dawn of a new millennium.

“I’m getting slammed with big orders,” said Kurt Wilson, a distributor of freeze-dried foods and other provisions with decades-long shelf life, like canned meat, cheese and butter.

“I have customers who were spending 200 bucks a month now spending $5,000 to $8,000,” Wilson said from his warehouse in Coeur d’Alene, Idaho. “I get little old ladies calling up, stocking up for their grandchildren.”

Wilson, who also has an online radio show called the Armchair Survivalist, said one of his new clients is a New York interior designer who specializes in outfitting cramped Manhattan apartments with hidden food storage units that double as tasteful furnishings.

Richard Mankemyer, general manager of the Survival Center, in McKenna, Wash. said he too is swamped.

“There are a lot more people interested in being prepared, stocking up and being on their own for extended periods of time, as we’ve been advising,” he said. Among them are businesses, he said, including a major Northwest corporation that recently spent “tens of thousands of dollars” to stock up on shelf-stable foods for its executives. He would not identify the company, but he said he urged the officials to stock up for its other employees as well.

Not just for the ‘Planet X’ crowd

Also reporting an uptick in business is Utah Shelter Systems, which makes underground dwellings designed for surviving the aftermath of a biological or nuclear attack.

“I think the economy certainly is part of it,” Sharon Packer, part owner of the Salt Lake City company, said of the surge in orders this year. “Anytime we become vulnerable, our risk of a terrorist attacks increases.”

She emphasizes that most people who purchase the shelters, which run between $40,000 and $50,000, are wealthy professionals interested in hedging their bets.

“Every once in awhile I have people who are concerned about Planet X or little green men, but they are usually not our clients,” she says.

A less surprising indication of the public nervousness about the recent financial turmoil can be found in gold brokerages and coin shops around the country. Many say that demand for gold and silver has been off the charts in recent months — a clear measure of concerns about the U.S. dollar and the soundness of the economy as a whole.

“We’re seeing absolutely unprecedented demand,” said Peter Grant, gold broker and analyst at USA Gold in Denver. “We’re seeing the full gamut … from high net worth (clients) to people looking at just a couple of ounces at a time.”

Preparing for a ‘major paradigm shift’

Seattle survivalist Hagmahani sees such commodity hoarding as just a partial measure for weathering a financial crisis.

On his blog, mutuallyassuredsurvival.com, he advises people to prepare for a “major paradigm shift” that will, in a decade, leave the U.S. with a Third World economy.

The $700 billion government financial bailout, in his view, only ensures a crisis that cannot be avoided after unbridled lending and spending.

“One of the most frightening possibilities is the banking system freezing up,” he said. “... Our remittance system is almost entirely through the banking system. … Without ATMs, you can’t get groceries, you can’t get paid… Is that a possibility? Yes.”

So Hagmahani, whose pen name is derived from the ancient religion of Zoroastrianism, is focused on procuring and stashing away enough food to last his family — himself, his wife and three kids — up to two years.

He said he began his preparations after witnessing the burst of the high-tech bubble in 2001, paying off the family’s debt, moving his assets away from stocks into safer investments, including, he implies, some precious metals and offshore accounts.

In the last three or four years, he has led his clan away from what he calls their former “yuppyish lifestyle.” They no longer eat out, cook most meals from scratch, and rarely drive their one car. They also are all learning practical skills — such as sewing, nursing and wielding a gun for self-defense.

“One thing I’m adamant about is that each of the kids needs real skills; they can’t just be a pencil pusher,” says Hagmahani of 19-year-old Hans, Sofia, 14, and Erik, 12. “You might get lucky and get a cushy job, but you might not. You need high-tech skills and low-tech skills for dealing with a systemic breakdown.”

Looking for farmland in South America

In addition to shifting some of his high-tech windfall into safe havens, Hagmahani is looking into buying farmland in South America — a last-ditch destination should the economic crisis become a catastrophe.

At the same time, he wants to be a model for others who want to be prepared. And he has his fans, relatively mainstream Americans who are worried by what they see and hear on the evening news.

“I didn’t want to be the crazy aunt in the attic,” said Susan Oakes, a fan of Hagmahani’s Internet site. She started worrying about the state of the economy a few years ago. “I started reading more and trying to find people who were credible, and not the tinfoil hat group…. trying to figure out what I could do,” she said.

To save money, she combined households with her two daughters’ families in eastern Washington state. She cashed out of some of her savings and bought gold, and then started to garden on their half-acre plot. She has stockpiled staples and learned to can her fruits and vegetables. She now has enough, she believes, to last her family for six months and to have some left for charity, which she expects to be in

high demand.

But Oakes said she finds no comfort in being well-prepared for what she fears is coming.

“We’re in deep doo-doo,” she said. “I honestly believe the government thinks we’re idiots. … I get that they can’t come out and say ‘the sky is falling’ but it is.”

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