

Local jurisdictions now have guidelines on evacuation plans for pets and livestock

ODA drafts overall response plan for animals in disasters

March 19, 2008... It was an issue in 2005 when Hurricane Katrina slammed into the Gulf Coast. Closer to home, it was also an issue last December when floods threatened the Oregon communities of Tillamook and Vernonia. Animals, as well as people, can be imperiled during natural disasters and may need to be evacuated. The Oregon Department of Agriculture has published a new document titled "Oregon Response Plan for Animals in Disasters", and is circulating it throughout the state's 36 counties as guidelines for local responses. By the end of the year, ODA hopes all local jurisdictions will have their own specific plans on how to deal with both pets and livestock in the event of an emergency.

"Through our experiences, we know that people are often reluctant to leave their pets or their livestock and evacuate themselves, so that becomes a human safety issue," says ODA's Don Hansen, State Veterinarian. "Also, of course, animals left behind are in grave danger of injury, disease, or death."

Directed by the Pets Evacuation and Transportation Standards Act at the federal level and Senate Bill 570 at the state level, ODA and Oregon Emergency Management (OEM) are active in addressing the issue. ODA has prepared a planning document that outlines roles and responsibilities as they apply to the care of domestic animals— from companion animals like cats, dogs, and birds to production animals like cattle, horses, and poultry. The plan is a guide to help coordinate a rapid response by state and local agencies, and volunteer organizations to rescue animals that might be in harms way during a disaster.

Counties and other local jurisdictions are in the midst of either strengthening an already existing plan to deal with animals in an emergency or creating one in the first place. Some are further along than others in having a system for evacuating pets or livestock. The ODA planning document should help, but it is no substitute for an individual plan at the local level.

"We are looking for uniformity around the state, but it would be naive to think that one plan could be developed to fit every scenario in every county," says Hansen. "Each county needs to develop its own plan for evacuation to address its own capabilities and limitations."

Any response would begin at a local level. Depending on the disaster scenario, the search and rescue of animals could stay local and not require additional help. But the larger the disaster, the greater the chance that state or regional resources would be needed. There is already an effective model available for adoption to manage the local response. The National Incident Management System (NIMS) and its Incident Command System (ICS) provide a recognized structure that has already proven itself in emergency situations. Identifying who's in charge and coordinating multiple jurisdictions is made easier through the systems.

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ODA's planning document is a compilation of some of the best elements from other states' existing plans. It lists a number of state agencies in Oregon expected to play a role in the event of a local disaster. The primary agencies include OEM, which coordinates support efforts, and ODA, which serves as the lead support agency in issues involving evacuation, shelter, and care of companion animals, service animals, and livestock.

ODA has had plenty of experience developing similar response plans for infectious diseases in animals, but this is the first time a plan has been directed more at animal safety and welfare.

The planning document recently prepared by ODA provides guidelines, checklists, and examples that can be used by counties and local jurisdictions as they prepare their own specific response plan for animals in disasters. That includes standard operating procedures for companion animal shelters and livestock sheltering facilities. Questionnaires to determine the willingness and ability of a volunteer to help with the animal response is also part of the planning document. There is even a form that can be used to list hotels and motels in Oregon that accept companion animals.

"A major element of the overall plan is to identify areas and facilities where emergency responders can safely take pets and livestock following evacuation," says Hansen. "That should all be done by pre-planning."

Another major initiative contained within the statewide planning document is public education.

"All animal owners— whether they have dogs, cats, or livestock— have some responsibility in a disaster to do the best they can to evacuate their own animals," says Hansen. "You can't just walk away from animals and expect someone else to respond and take care of them."

Public information messages contained in the planning document emphasize a variety of steps to be taken before a disaster hits. That includes proper identification of companion animals through embedded microchips or tags secured to the animal, proof of licenses, updated medical records, and suggested supplies for a companion animal emergency kit. For livestock, the advice includes predetermining evacuation routes and sites where food, water, and veterinary care could be provided. It's all about planning well in advance of any emergency.

Another major responsibility for ODA is to assist local jurisdictions as they develop local animal disaster response plans. That is taking place right now.

"We are getting down to the nitty-gritty details such as what kinds of people should be involved in an animal disaster response and how are they qualified to help," says Hansen. "County by county meetings are underway. We are showing the planning document and encouraging counties to develop their own local plan. We will work one-on-one with them in helping with that development."

Like all emergency response plans, everyone hopes these newly developed ones won't have to be taken off the shelf and implemented. But if disaster strikes, it's good to know that state and local officials are prepared to help animals as well as people.

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