

Animal Health in Disasters

The most common concern for animal health in disasters— animal safety—is frequently overlooked. If a situation is unsafe for people, it is also unsafe for animals. Therefore recommendations to evacuate people should always be accompanied by recommendations to evacuate animals. Other animal health concerns have been discussed in the various chapters on hazards. Although disaster-related injuries in animals are rare, the use of SNOMED codes by veterinary schools and hospitals would greatly enhance the potential to conduct retrospective studies on diseases that animals suffer in disasters.

One special concern for pet health is the threat of contagious disease, which is most likely to arise in floods or when large numbers of pets are congregated in poorly managed facilities.

Contagious Disease

Contagious disease can occur when floodwaters reactivate latent diseases in the environment and spread them to areas that were previously safe. Contagious diseases that are of risk to dogs include parvovirus and coronavirus diarrhea, distemper, heartworm disease, and leptospirosis. Of greatest risk to cats is feline panleukopenia. Many of these diseases can be spread through contact, aerosol, or the drinking of contaminated floodwater. Heartworm is a concern because of the increased number of mosquitoes that emerge after a flood. In addition, contact with standing water may cause severe dermatitis and enteritis. Animals also face an increased risk of internal parasite (worm) and flea infestations.

Contagious disease is best prevented before a disaster strikes. This can be achieved by the vaccination of pets. Heartworm infection can be a concern if pets do not receive continuous preventive treatment after a disaster. Veterinarians should remind their clients to continue such treatment after a disaster has disrupted a community's life. Also, pets should be treated for intestinal parasites if this is needed.

Treatment of Pets

Advice on animal diseases and their treatments should be sought only from veterinarians. Owners and emergency managers should determine before a disaster which veterinarian to contact as part of the community plan for the care of animals and their owners.

All animals being treated or cared for should have a medical record that contains verified information about who the owner is and where the owner lives. This will allow the owner to be traced so that follow-up care for the pet can be pursued after the acute stages of the disaster. Often veterinarians and other animal care providers do not charge pet owners in disasters. This does not constitute free treatment; it is pro bono treatment. Veterinarians should keep track of their customary charges for diagnosis and treatment of animals as part of the medical record. The same applies to housing and administrative costs incurred by animal shelters and hotlines.

Disaster relief is expensive, and it behooves the animal care community to keep track of the cost of its services. Failure to maintain records of these expenses results in perpetual underfunding and low credibility of disaster relief efforts for animals and their owners.

Disaster response personnel often have to deal with a pet's chronic disease that was clearly present before the disaster. Also, it appears that some animal owners from outside the disaster-affected area seek veterinary care for their pets in the disaster area. This can be frustrating and cause friction among disaster response personnel.

The resolution is simple: disaster relief workers should not discriminate among different types of victims. Therefore, although some owners may undeservingly take advantage of the pro bono

veterinary services, the animals of these owners should always be treated. This is because the number of such owners is small, the animals probably really do require medical attention, and the owners' requests for help are most likely projections of the need for help themselves. Arguing with these owners or denying them the same type of veterinary services as other disaster victims is likely to worsen the owners' psychologic state, deny health care to the animals, and waste precious time. If concerns arise about the legitimacy of providing disaster services, these concerns should be addressed later, which will be possible if adequate records have been kept.

Pet Emergencies

As with humans, the most common emergencies for pets are not in major disasters but in local incidents. Some examples are when cats get stuck in trees, puppies fall into wells, dogs fall through ice, or horses fall into canyons. Many times the local fire department or search and rescue team is called. Response by these teams can be controversial because of considerable expense and possible risk to human life. Although no simple solution exists to the issue of human risk versus animal rescue, some pros and cons can help individual communities develop policies on pet emergencies.

Human life always comes first. If rescue personnel have to choose between rescuing an animal or a person, they obviously must choose the person. If the call to rescue a person arrives midway through the rescue of an animal, the rescue attempt for the animal should be abandoned even if this results in the animal's death or the rescuer has to perform euthanasia. Second, the cost of the rescue should be borne by the animal's owner. The majority of animal rescues are necessary because an irresponsible animal owner left an animal unsupervised. Third, the exact charge should be worked out by taking the actual expenses into account and weighing them against the training that these rescues offer. The experience gained from pet emergencies improves future rescues of humans.

When Pets Are Left Behind

In the study on pet evacuation in Weyauwega we asked owners who did not evacuate their pets what their greatest concerns for the pets were. The concerns were similar for different types of pets and somewhat predictable. Dog owners were most concerned about lack of food; cat owners were most concerned about the lack of food and water; bird owners were most concerned about a lack of water; and fish and reptile owners were most concerned about a lack of heat.

Euthanasia

The owner obviously is the best person to make a decision about whether to euthanize an animal, but the issue can arise when the owner is not present. When that is the case, Good Samaritan laws apply to those who have to make the decision.

Professional animal care providers deal with the issue of euthanasia nearly every day in practice. Protocols that are established for their practices should apply in disasters too.