

Why do we Need Plans

A 20-year gap

A lack of consistency of the veterinary profession with IEMS is similar in many ways to that of all emergency management in the early 1970s. Individuals and groups who want to care for animals and their owners have done so as ad hoc emergency organizations in disasters or as interest groups whose experience is based on a few incidents in which members were involved, usually as victims. The integration of veterinary services into emergency management plans often comes as an afterthought in disasters.

A probable reason for the poor level of integration is a lack of understanding among animal health care providers as well as emergency managers. Emergency managers tend to overlook or be unaware of the size and complexity of the animal care industries and their relevance to the United States and her communities. Animal health care providers often appear to lack an appreciation of existing and definitive authority and of the responsibility of emergency management over all operations in disasters. There has been an inordinate emphasis on the need to care for animals per se rather than the public health concerns that arise out of the need to care for animals. There has also been a denial of the economic impact that the animal care industry has on society, especially livestock agriculture's impact.

Furthermore, it is not commonly recognized that only skilled animal health care professionals can adequately identify the needs of animals and their owners. EMAs and public health departments have attempted to perform such duties in the past, but they have not done a good job. The accurate assessment of the needs of animals and their owners and the ability to suggest realistic solutions are major contributions that veterinary health professionals can make to the welfare of disaster victims. These activities should not be assumed by or delegated to persons unfamiliar with animal care issues. The status of the care of animals in disasters in pre-FIRESCOPE times is exemplified by the following typical occurrences.

Inadequate Joint Planning

The director of emergency management in a metropolitan area asked his dog's veterinarian to be the lead person to deal with all pet-related issues in the event of a major earthquake.

Why is this not joint planning? Because the responsibility for developing plans for the care of animals and the owners is the joint responsibility of all stakeholders in the animal care community, not just a personal friend. An individual person is neither capable nor legally empowered to be the sole contact for emergency management.

Lack of a Common Organization

In one state the State Veterinary Medical Association (VMA) enters into an agreement with the National Guard that says they will work together to take care of animal-related issues in disasters. In another a humane society based in a different state writes the "state emergency operations plan" and promises to be there when the disaster strikes. In yet another state the EMA, department of agriculture, VMA, and animal control agency enter into an agreement to work together in disasters.

Why are these approaches so different? In each case different groups have assumed that they are the lead agency. However, only the last example is appropriate. Because of the large differences in organization it is likely that in the event of a multistate incident, communication and the chain of command will break down. Lack of acceptance of existing emergency

management structure and lack of training of animal care personnel by professional emergency management have been major holdups in veterinary disaster management.

Poor On-Scene Interagency Communications

After a major flood an animal care group sets up a temporary housing facility for lost pets at fairgrounds outside of the county in which the flood occurred. The facility was widely publicized in the media and inspired the public to bring animals that were found in the flooded county to it. However, no reports of animals found in the flooded county were filed.

Why is this poor interagency communications? Found animals are under the jurisdiction of the department of animal control where the animal was found. Removing found animals from the flooded county may have been well intentioned but is technically theft. Found animals have to be registered with the department of animal control in the county where they are found.

Lack of Timely and Valid Information

The need to care for injured horses arose 3 weeks after a major hurricane. Calls for help were issued to assist 8000 to 10,000 horses that supposedly were dying of injuries, colic, and dehydration.

Why is this information untimely and invalid? The greatest need for help with the horses was immediate. Accurate assessment indicated that immediately after the storm approximately 150 horses needed treatment, and no more than a dozen deaths were ever substantiated. With appropriate planning the horses could have been readily managed with local resources, perhaps with some assistance from out-of-state teams.

The numbers are invalid because there are no census data for horses in most states. Special interest groups created the 8000 to 10,000 figure to show a plight. It is the maximum number that could be expected at peak times at racetracks and breeding and training farms. In this incident the actual horses needing care were kept in a typical manner for horses in that area, which is in small, noncommercial bands.

Limited Ability to Predict

During a tabletop exercise in which communities were supposed to have been threatened by a nuclear plume, planners had included scenarios in which thousands of dairy cows were potentially affected.

Why is this an example of limited ability to predict? The scenario was based on incomplete data, although the correct information was actually available from the state veterinarian's office or department of agriculture. Maps provided by the state veterinarian's office showed that only two farms with fewer than 80 cows would have been in the plume zone. By including these agencies in the planning stages a more realistic scenario with greater educational impact could have been designed.

Inefficient Resource Management

After a large-scale evacuation from the site of a hazardous materials spill, many pets needed to be rescued. In press releases during and after the incident, two out-of-state humane groups claimed to have organized the rescue. Also, later that year one out-of-county group claimed expenses for materials it used in the rescue. In reality a clerk in the city office organized the rescue and the local volunteers organized a food distribution program for rescued pets.

Why is this inefficient resource management? Because the affected county had a humane

society and veterinary services that could have organized the entire effort and later received credit for their efforts. The local humane society also would have been reimbursed for its efforts. The outside groups neither were invited nor made much of an impact, but they did attract donations that would have gone to the affected county.

Jurisdiction and Assignment of Responsibilities

The laxity in recognizing appropriate authority led to considerable confusion in the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill episode, in which legal debates surrounded the ownership of pathologic samples from sea otters. Exxon claimed ownership of the samples because the company had paid for their collection. The federal government claimed ownership because the sea otter is federally protected. The state of Alaska claimed ownership because the samples resulted from an incident on their land. Finally, pathologists claimed the samples because the group had collected them and felt qualified to interpret them. As a result of this confusion regarding jurisdiction, scientifically based care for the sea otters was delayed, and out of more than 300 animals sampled, only 23 had complete pathologic data sets.

Funding for the Care of Animals and Their Owners

The current reliance on privately funded care for animals in disasters is of great concern because it does not ensure future care provisions. To improve and to avert a decline in the current standards of care for animals and their care providers in disasters, the need for these efforts should be officially recognized and adopted by emergency management leaders. For this to occur, society must acknowledge that in disasters animal owners are “persons with special needs.” It must also be recognized that the care of animals in disasters is ultimately a humanitarian, economic, and public health support function for communities and therefore deserves high priority. The cost of caring for animals and their owners is small in comparison with other expenses of emergency response (e.g., public buildings and works). Relatively small expenditures on animal care have the potential to alleviate anxiety and distress in persons already devastated by the disaster and to relieve animal suffering with great efficiency.

I hope that by pointing out these examples, future programs and decisions will be improved. Perhaps some day Congress will fund a VETSCOPE to investigate the involvement of the animal care industry in all phases of disaster management.