

Fostering and Adoption Programs

The Oakland firestorm spawned sensational reports of individual cats that were found up to 2 years after the fires, but these reports were rare. Although they can inspire hope in concerned owners and rescue workers, these are unusual events that resulted in reunion because of diligent owners. In most cases the reunions were not the result of hotline activities. Therefore these unusual time spans should not be used to determine the length of time a shelter should remain open to deal with pets affected by a disaster.

Stray animals (any animal without an owner at its side) normally fall under the regulatory control of the department of animal control in the jurisdiction where they are found. These regulations apply during disasters too. Most communities have detailed ordinances that empower animal control officers with the care and disposal of stray animals. Animal control officers generally expect owners to come looking for their pets rather than to wait for animal control officers to look for them. The same should be true after a disaster.

Shelters for strays affected by a disaster should be administered by animal control officials. Finding foster and adoptive homes for stray pets after disasters may be a role for humane groups. However, local authorities should administer these efforts to prevent resentment of outside groups' receiving undue credit and sponsorship.

The location of shelters accepting strays should be advertised together with a deadline for pet collection. Recommended deadlines are 3 weeks after the disaster or 48 hours after Red Cross shelters close, whichever is shorter. After that time the pets should be treated as abandoned and be handled according to normal animal control policy. When an animal is given foster care, it does not become the property of the person giving foster care unless he or she adopts it.

Pet Hotlines After Disasters

Telephone hotlines are an effective method for advertising the location of found pets and a clearinghouse for owners searching for lost pets. After the Oakland firestorm the greatest numbers of hotline registrations were on days three and four, and the days of highest activity were the first 10. Nearly all hotline registrations occurred in the first 3 weeks after the fire. Few animals were found after that time, and even fewer were reunited with owners. Several Emergency Animal Rescue Programs (EARPs) may be able to offer advice on operating hotlines. However, the authority over these hotlines should lie with a local group whose members know the community best, know-how to appeal to its residents, and as the community is rebuilt, will still be in the community and be recognized for their efforts.

Every animal that is registered with a hotline should have a unique record with information on where it was found, who found it, the type of animal, approximate age, and a brief description. Detailed descriptions of found animals should be avoided because they lead to considerable confusion and inconsistency in record keeping. Tables 27-3 and 27-4 give examples of information that should be compiled on animals found in disasters. Telephone conversations should also be recorded. Ideally all records are kept in a single database with search capabilities. Standard software programs can be used for this (e.g., Microsoft Excel or Microsoft Access).

Table 27-3 Information that should be collected about animals found after disasters

Stray animals
 Name, address, and contact phone number of person who found animal
 Street address where animal was found
 Description of animal: type, breed, approximate age, color, coat length (Table 27-4)

Adopted or reunited animals
 Owner or adopter name, address, contact phone number, and driver's license number
 A signed receipt by the owner or adopter

For animals that require treatment
 If brought in by owner: owner's name, address, contact phone number, and driver's license number
 If brought in by public: information as above for strays

Separate record should be set up for feeding, watering, exercising, and medical care; each animal should have unique number

Table 27-4 Suggested breed types and coat color descriptions for use in disasters

Descriptor	Species	
	Cat	Dog
Breed	Domestic Short Hair	Labrador
		German shepherd
	Domestic Long Hair	Chow
	Siamese	Poodle
	Burmese	Terrier
	Manx	Setter
Size	Not appropriate	Hound
		Other
		Miniature
		Toy
		Small
		Medium
Coat color	Solid black	Solid black
	Solid white	Solid white
	Solid gray	Solid gray
	Black and white	Black and white
	Gray and white	Tricolor
	Gray tabby	Light brown
	Orange tabby	Dark brown
	Calico	
Coat length	Short	Short
	Long	Long

Use of additional or more specific descriptions is likely to lead to confusion among staff.

Because most responsible owners look for their pets, public service announcements on the location of pets and the deadline for picking them up should be sufficient. Fortunately for lost and abandoned pets in Oakland, the rate of adoption of animals increased after the fires there. This was particularly true for pets found close to the fire (Fig. 27-2). This appears to be a form of goodwill that persons close to a disaster and its victims display toward animals.

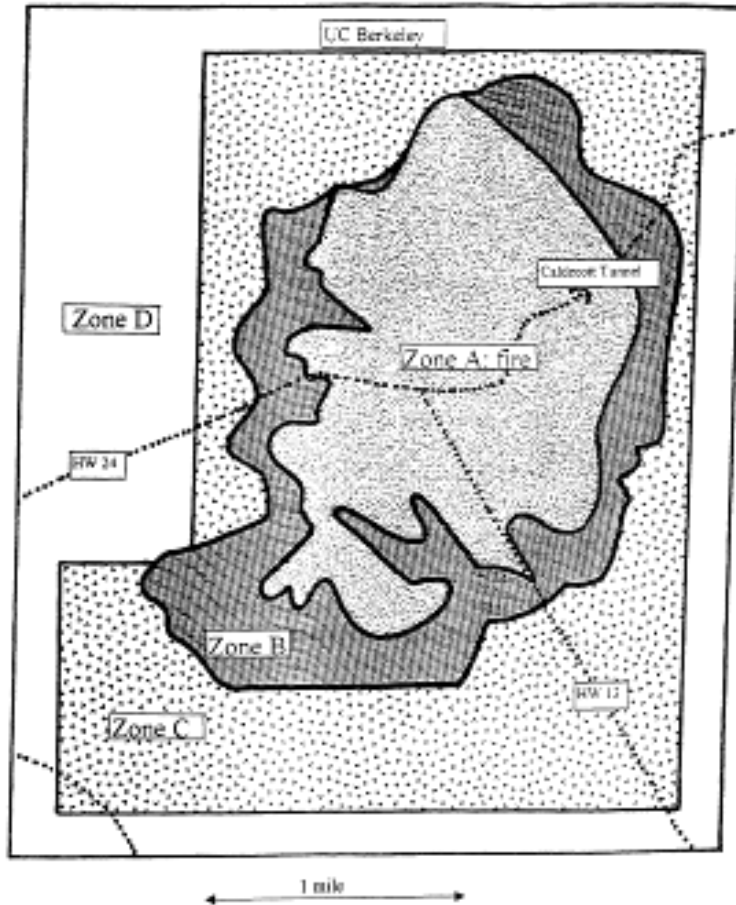


FIG. 27-2 Areas around the Oakland, California, firestorm, 1991. Zone A, Area destroyed by fire. Zone B, Areas within approximately 0.5 mile of edge of fire. Zone C, Areas approximately 1 mile from edge of fire. Zone D, Areas greater than 1 mile from edge of fire. When compared with the area affected by the fire, the rates of adoption of pets were 12 times higher in Zone B, 6 times higher in Zone C, and 2 times higher in Zone D.

For the few cases of true separation that occur in disasters we have found that the pets are reunited with their owners within 3 weeks of the incident. These pets generally come from households with responsible owners who take the initiative to find them (Fig. 27-3).



FIG. 27-3 This owner found his sheltie after looking in several humane shelters and veterinary practices. Reunions of pets and owners after disasters are usually the result of owners who take the initiative to look for their pets. (Photo by Kerri Marshall.)

Recommendations

Mitigation of pet abandonment is most likely to come from promoting responsible pet ownership in general. Factors that have been associated with decreased pet relinquishment in nondisaster times are likely to be the same in disasters. These are taking the pet regularly to a veterinarian, having it vaccinated and spayed or neutered, identifying and registering the animal, and paying for it. Obtaining a carrier for a cat and training a dog to get along with unfamiliar people and animals are additional examples of responsible actions that should be encouraged in pet owners.