

How Animals are Affected by Fires

Public Health Concerns Surrounding Animals in Fires

There are frequent reports of deaths, primarily of children, caused by attempts to save pets from burning houses. Firefighters know that they should look for children in burning houses where they suspect pets to be. There also have been tragic reports of territorial pets preventing access to burning houses. In one such report in Indianapolis, four children died because pit bulls prevented access to the house by firefighters

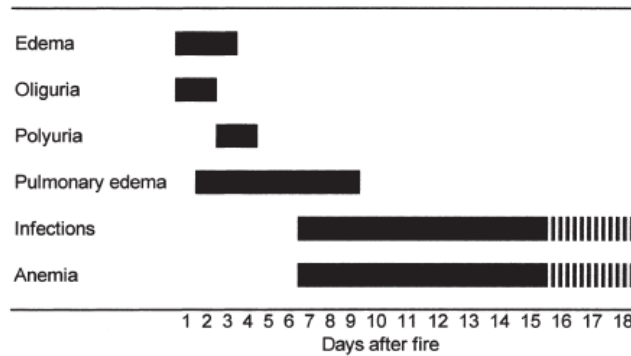


FIG. 10-3 Time at which complications from exposure to barn fires occur in livestock and horses. (Modified from Pagel S: *Tierverluste und Schaeden infolge von Stallbranded*, doctoral dissertation, 1986, University of Berlin.)

This type of tragedy can be prevented by firefighters and professional animal care personnel working together on how to deal with such situations.

Animal Health

Several reports provide an insight into what happens to animals in fires.

In Northern California in 1988 the 49er fires resulted in one of the first reports of a large-scale evacuation of animals because of fire. Although there are few reports on the numbers of animals affected, the types of animals affected are the same as one would expect to be living in the wild-land-urban interface. These were horses, livestock, llamas, and pets. The repeated conclusion of reports from this fire indicates that volunteer networks at the site were the single greatest factor in moving animals to safety. The volunteers rounded up and led animals to safety. Their efforts were most effective during the period of voluntary evacuation, since only then could evacuation be conducted safely for both humans and animals.

In California in 1993 many fires were burning concurrently. At Thousand Oaks the need arose to evacuate approximately 40 animals from a veterinary hospital and approximately 140 cats and dogs from an animal shelter. The greatest problem encountered in these evacuations was an inadequate number of cages. Apparently the majority of injuries that animals suffered in these evacuations resulted from fights between animals put in the same cage.

In another fire in 1993 the owners of a private collection of exotic animals that had to be evacuated were forced to euthanize three large cats that could not be moved rapidly and safely. That year *in Laguna Beach, California*, 18 veterinary practices reported on the care of animals in

fires. Table 10-1 summarizes their efforts. The most commonly reported deficiency in the response to these fires was the lack of integration of veterinarians into the community's emergency management before the fire. This lack of integration led to a lack of communications (knowing where the greatest threats were), lack of access to threatened areas, and inability to file claims for expenses because of lack of official recognition for their efforts.

In 1996 in Alaska forest fires north of Anchorage necessitated the movement of hundreds of sled dogs. Sled dogs are kept in large packs. The greatest problems were associated with the sheer number of animals that needed to be moved. Similar problems were reported by horse owners, for whom the greatest difficulty was finding an adequate number of trailers to move the horses to safety. In both cases prior planning or early recognition of the threat of fire and arrangement for the transportation of animals would have facilitated the care of these animals.

Table 10-1 Summary of veterinarians' activities during the Laguna Beach, California, fires of 1993

Factor	Total	Mean per practice	Median per practice
Cats	196	11	4
Dogs	62	3	5
Horses	51	3	11*
Pocket pets	50	3	1
Hours input by veterinarian	77	4.3	4
Hours input by veterinary technicians	272	15	8
Veterinary medical expenses [†]	\$4885	\$271.40	\$35

Data from California Veterinary Medical Association.

*Only three reports by veterinarians dealt with horse farms.

[†]Does not include cost of time for veterinarians or veterinary technicians.

The *Oakland firestorm in 1991* is perhaps the best documented fire. Three reports on this fire reveal the different fates of pets. In many ways the fate of pets in the Oakland firestorm also indicates how pets may fare in general in disasters.

In the book *Operation Pet Rescue: Animal Survivors of the Oakland, California, Firestorm* by Greg Zompolis (JN Townsend Publishing), a detailed account of events is given and the fate of many pets is described. A sad conclusion is that many pets died (500 in total) as a result of the fire. These were pets known to have been left in owners' houses or that owners were unable to catch.

By contrast a report by a local veterinarian who had nearly 800 of his clients affected by the fire indicated a very low (only mortality in pets. This is probably because the clients of this veterinarian took their pets with them when they evacuated.

A third report by myself and others studied several hundred pets that were found after the fire. One of the principal conclusions from this report was that many of the pets found after the fire were strays or were abandoned at the time of the fire.