

## **Leaving Pets Behind**

Rescue attempts by pet owners were a major issue after the Weyauwega, Wisconsin, train derailment in the spring of 1996. In this incident burning propane tanker cars threatened to explode. As a safety precaution, the entire town of 1022 households was evacuated for 18 days. Because many people had left their pets at home, the Incident Manager (Commander) arranged a pet rescue on the fourth day of evacuation.

Our group at Purdue University conducted a mail survey of all pet owners of Weyauwega about a year after the derailment. We asked about what happened, why people made the decisions they did, and how the pets fared. We were able to analyze 241 completed surveys in great detail.

Pet owners did one of three things with their pets. About one third of pet owners evacuated with all of their pets at the time of the derailment, one third evacuated without their pets and then attempted to rescue them, and one third left their pets in their homes for the entire 18 days.

Most pet rescues were carried out on the fourth day, when officials had declared it safe. However, about one third of the pet owners who attempted to rescue their pets did so in defiance of the security system (i.e., they sneaked in at night). These rescues were what made Weyauwega famous, but the media did not report on the initial pet evacuations or on pets that owners left in their homes for the entire evacuation period. This is regrettable because it kept the public ignorant of the best alternative (pet evacuation) and one of the worst (leaving pets in the danger area).

## **A case study**

Our goal for the Weyauwega study was to learn from the owners who did the best thing, which was to evacuate with their pets. We compared owner and pet-related factors of households that evacuated pets with those that did not.

The reason most owners (96.5%) gave for not evacuating their pets was that the owners thought they would not be gone long. Many (87.4%) also assumed that their pets would be safe. The most common (approximately 50%) “other” reason given for not evacuating pets was that the owners were at work when the derailment occurred.

A strong association was found between owner attachment-and-commitment scores and pet evacuation rates. Owners with the lowest attachment-and-commitment scores were five times less likely to evacuate all of their pets.

Evacuation rates varied among types of pets. Dogs were twice as likely as cats to be evacuated and four times more likely to be evacuated than other types of pets (e.g., birds, fish, and reptiles).

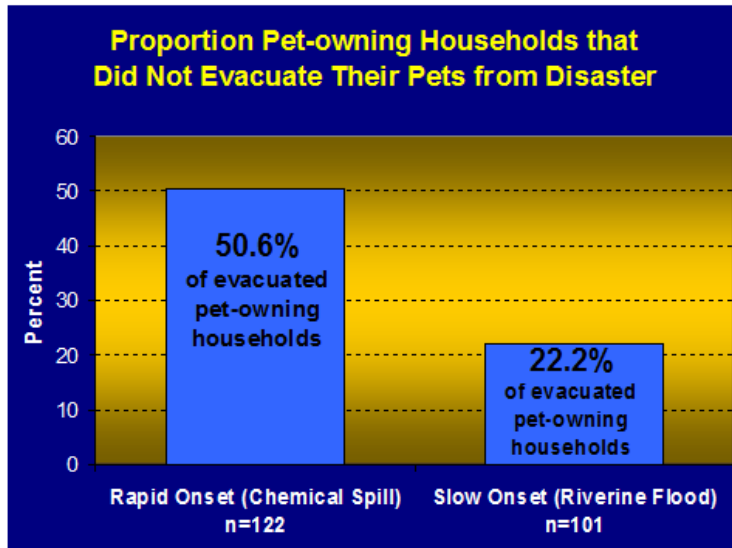
Nearly 40% of owners indicated that they did not evacuate their dogs because they did not know where to take them. Other factors associated with failure to evacuate dogs were that the dogs were not licensed or that the dogs lived outdoors.

More than 50% of cat owners indicated that they did not evacuate their cats because they could not catch them. Another factor was a low level of owner preparedness, including not having a cat carrier. Cat owners who also owned multiple dogs were more likely to evacuate their cat than were cat owners who did not own dogs.

About half of the owners of other types of pets failed to evacuate their animals because they did not know how or where to transport the pets.

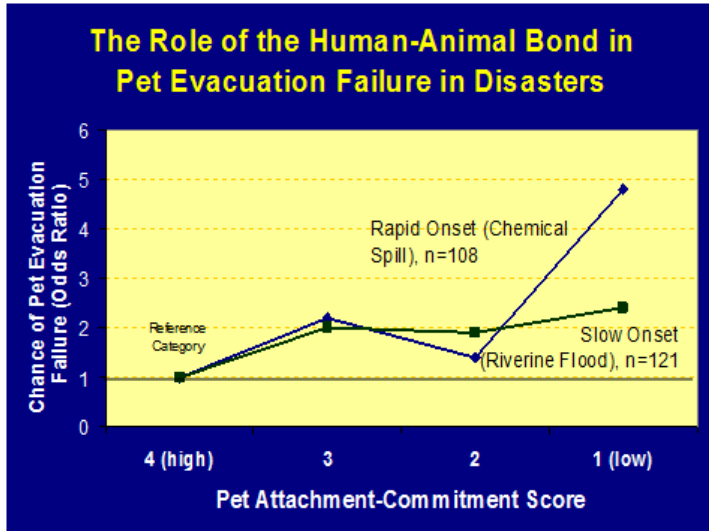
Pet evacuation failure (which is a form of pet abandonment), occurs when pet owners evacuate and leave their pets at home and has been a relatively common phenomenon in U.S. disasters.

Chart showing the proportion of Pet-owning Households that did not evacuate their pets from a slow and a rapid onset disaster.



The decision to leave pets behind is often erroneously attributed to inappropriate advice given by emergency management and law enforcement to leave pets behind. Although such misleading advice has been given, it has not proven to be a factor in the field or in research studies to affect pet owner's behavior on a large scale. Research findings support that the principle reason owners leave their pets behind is because these owners have weak bonds with pets at the time of (and after) a disaster. There are many indicators and supporting evidence for this statement. The strongest support comes from peer reviewed research that shows that the lower an owner's pet attachment score is the more likely they are to evacuate leave their pets. Other indicators of a weak bond with pets include pets that do not have collars or visited a veterinarian in the year preceding a disaster, both of which are surrogate measures of pet attachment.

Chart showing an inverse correlation between the strength of pet owners' bond with their pets and the likelihood that they will evacuate their pet in both slow and rapid onset disasters.



Affecting this detrimental behavior for the better is difficult, but encouraging appropriate behavior is most likely to succeed through public awareness (preparedness) campaigns such as “If it’s not safe for you, it’s not safe for your animals” and public education campaigns with advice on what pet owners can do to behave appropriately in disasters - which is to evacuate with pets. Vice versa, looking at things from a public safety perspective, knowing that the strength of the human animal bond is a strong indicator for owners behavior in disasters, advice on the right thing to do for animals positively reinforces the human animal bond and will likely encourage appropriate evacuation behavior amongst pet owners.

### Recommendations

The data we collected are strong evidence that the quality of a relationship between an owner and pet before a disaster is a good indicator of the care an owner will provide for a pet during and after a disaster. Therefore programs that promote responsible pet ownership in nondisaster times are likely to mitigate pet rescue attempts.

When faced with an evacuation, emergency management officials should recommend that owners evacuate with their pets. This recommendation should not be quashed by fear that emergency managers must then provide care for the pets. Ultimately it is the owners who are responsible for care of their animals, not emergency management officials.

The most common reason that dog owners leave their dogs behind is that owners do not know where to take them. Mitigation of this problem is simple: dog owners should be advised to make boarding arrangements with friends, family, or kennel facilities before evacuation and to train their dogs to behave well with unfamiliar people and animals.

For cat owners mitigation includes advising cat owners to purchase a carrier for each of their cats. Also, emergency management personnel could offer cardboard carriers to cat owners for evacuation.