

Mitigating Legislation that Helps Animals in Disasters

National

At the national level, in the U.S., an example of effective legislation is the Pet Evacuation and Transportation Standards (PETS) Act, which addresses “the needs of individuals with pets and service animals prior to, during, and following a major disaster or emergency” by making the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) preparedness grant funds available “to the States and local authorities for animal emergency preparedness purposes, including the procurement, construction, leasing, or renovating of emergency shelter facilities and materials that will accommodate people with pets and service animals”. Coincidental with the passing of this law and the recovery from Hurricane Katrina (in 2005) many States have greatly increased the use of federal FEMA preparedness grant funding for activities involving animals; notably, however, many of these activities supported animal agriculture and not pets.

State

At the State level, legislation can mitigate animal disasters by including laws that clearly define who is in charge and what resources are available to them. All States in the U.S. clearly define the office of the State Animal Health Official (usually the State Veterinarian) who has the lead on managing outbreaks of regulated animal diseases, such as Foot and Mouth Disease, Avian Influenza and Classical Swine Fever. However, there is no uniformity in who has the authority to care for pets, that are free of notifiable diseases, in natural disasters. This is in part because most State animal welfare laws have often been written piecemeal over decades and, as a result, often do not have comprehensive objectives or set a uniform tone on expected standards of care or enforcement. In an attempt to offer an effective solution, Garvey, et al., analyzed State legislation on animal care and drafted model legislations. Based on the analysis of state laws the authors recommend where mitigation efforts at the State level could be improved in the U.S. and offers an example of what comprehensive animal care legislation could look like.

Local

Local ordinances can also mitigate animal disasters by enacting strong animal control laws and backing this up with enforcement. For example, ordinances that implement effective spay-neuter programs for dogs and cats would reduce the number of strays in a community, which in turn likely reduce the number of stray animals that emerge in the wake of disasters. Regulations limiting the number of animals people can keep also establishes expectations for the public to limit the number of animals under their care to a reasonable span of control. Such laws create a mindset amongst animal owners that they should not own more animals than they can take care of, especially considering the potential consequences of disasters. Studies have shown a direct correlation between the number of animals in a household and the chance of those pet owners not evacuating, Figure 3 [21, 22]. Furthermore, restricting the number of animals that can be housed in a household prevents the potential for animal neglect. Because animal neglect is in part defined as placing animals in unsafe and dangerous environments, one can assume that when people are told to evacuate during a disaster it's because the environment is unsafe and dangerous. When people house more animals than they can care for, during an evacuation, when they leave animals behind, they expose these animals to unsafe environments, and therefore are subjecting the animals to neglect. When people try to provide for too many animals with limited resources they are living on the brink of disaster in which animals could suffer when, in disasters, resources that are already under limited supply become further constrained.

Although most communities in the U.S. have laws and regulations that limit the number of animals that can be housed in a residence, regrettably few communities are endowed with adequate levels of enforcement of these ordinances. Frequently, animal control agencies are subservient to various agencies, such as law enforcement or public health, which can lead to low prioritization of animal issues before, during and after disaster strikes, because of the many other competing needs that are thought of as more directly impacting human lives. Other common deficiencies in animal control agencies are lack of trained personnel and funding for staff to maintain animal control facilities and spay-neuter programs. Chronic underfunding of animal control agencies is a deficiency in mitigation that further reduces a community's ability to plan and prepare for emergencies and, with that, limit the effectiveness of response. Low pay of animal control workers further exacerbates a community's inability to effectively implement all phases of emergency management, because of the resulting poor retention of trained and experienced personnel.