

## **Disaster Medicine/Management Guidelines**

The seeming increase in man-made and natural disasters place horses and other animals at risk for injury, illness, and entrapment from floodwaters or other disaster-related debris. They are further endangered by exposure to weather and environmental or other hazards that result from the lack of safe confinement and shelter or from isolation and lack of access to fresh food and water.

There are multiple effective ways for a veterinarian to become involved with disaster response efforts, including service as a first responder; acceptance of disaster-related cases at their practice; provision of resources such as money or use of their facilities; and dispensation of medical advice to first responders such as firefighters, police officers, and other veterinarians.

It is important to distinguish between disaster medicine/management and emergency medicine. Emergency medicine deals with one individual at a given moment whereas disaster medicine/management is grounded in concepts that include multiples of animals (multiple species and types of injuries) complicated by absence or limitation of, or competition for, resources among responders across a spectrum of needs affecting human and animal welfare. Disaster medicine and response management requires a population approach to problem solving that may or may not have been part of a veterinarian's professional experience or veterinary medical education. A good correlation is the chaos of a wartime MASH unit in the first few days of a disaster event.

Following are key considerations for any veterinarian contemplating disaster response participation:

- All disaster responses begin locally. The veterinarian is the expert regarding animal health and welfare.
- Access to disaster events as a veterinarian requires acceptance from local, regional, state or national emergency disaster authority. Assuming permission to enter without prior approval is wrong and can complicate rescue efforts.
- Recognizing the size and severity of an event, as well as the complexity inherent in most disasters, must be understood and provided in daily reports (intel). In addition, there are situations and considerations that often are not known during the early hours or days of a disaster. The first order of rescue/recovery is human life.
- Knowing, understanding, and following the Incident Command System (ICS) is essential for access to the event, personal protection, identification credentials, medical and legal liability, understanding who is in charge, and access to resources. Serious negative implications exist for veterinarians who are not integrated into the command structure of the response as it is key for integration of resources and communication. Never simply show up. For more information on becoming a part of a disaster response effort, access ICS courses offered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency at <https://training.fema.gov>.
- Personal, family and practice considerations (i.e., health, well-being, and stability) are priorities prior to determining whether to participate, particularly if the veterinarian's

family or practice has been directly or indirectly impacted by the disaster. Every potential participant should have a personal, family, and practice evacuation plan.

- Contacting and meeting with local emergency managers and other key personnel involved in the disaster response is the first step toward participation. This alerts emergency personnel of the veterinarian's desire to assist and what the practitioner or their team can offer. It also alerts the practitioner of what the locality can provide with regard to animal health and welfare, such as shelter, feed, and other materials.
- Planning for emergency animal shelter set up prior to the need is an essential aspect of all disaster response. This includes how to assess/access local resources for security, medical assistance, shelter, feed, water, and ultimate return of horses and other animals to affected owners.
- Disaster response is a much different type of practice, along with the likelihood that most veterinarians have not been trained or educated in disaster medicine/management. As such, a veterinarian's ability to assist in a disaster requires a degree of self-assessment to ensure they are placing themselves in an appropriate role. Veterinarians involved in disaster response as first responders will tend to a wide variety of injuries from catastrophic to minor, and the circumstances may be dire with little assistance, limited medications/materials, overwhelming numbers, and highly stressed horses and people in the mix.
- Understanding field triage in the event of multiple animal involvement is critical to managing resource limits while still providing care to as many animals as possible.
- Euthanasia is an unavoidable reality of most disasters due to the overwhelming injuries, such as from tornadic shrapnel or massive burns in wildfires, that may occur. Euthanasia must often be performed under less-than-ideal circumstances using non-traditional methods, and without owner consent if the owner is not known or present. This requires careful consideration, documentation and use of the ICS (applied jurisdictional chain of command and lines of communication) to reduce the risks of liability.
- Immediately following the response, record "lessons learned" from the event, and obtain input from all participants. Use a format that identifies what worked well, what could have been better, and what needs to be changed. This format will maintain focus on the fact that all disasters are difficult and imperfect, but each experience should be the springboard for improvement.
- Veterinarians who deploy to a disaster should always work under the auspices of the ICS system. Thus, no one should ever deploy to a disaster to assist, particularly across state lines, without first being requested and/or approved as a responder. This will assure their license to practice is valid, and that they (or their team) are integrated into the response plan for their own protection and for resource allocation (i.e., food, safety, security, etc.).

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