



Rescuing Animals in Disasters

Burke County, North Carolina • Los Angeles County, California

Summary: During an emergency or disaster, taking care of large animals requires advance planning and workers that know how to handle and move animals to safety. Burke County Emergency Services developed a rescue plan and sponsored training for emergency workers. In Los Angeles County in California, the Department of Animal Care and Control organized and trained the LA County Equine Response Team.

It happens every time there's a major disaster. Animals are left behind and their owners are desperate to save them. Many take their own lives in their hands to rescue their pets or evacuate their livestock, making response operations every more difficult for emergency management and responders.

That's why state and local governments across the country are including animal rescue and evacuation operations in their disaster planning. Take North Carolina, for example. Thousands of animals died and hundreds of others had to be rescued as a result of the flooding caused by Hurricane Floyd in 1999. Randy McKinney, assistant director of Burke County Emergency Services, was part of a swift water rescue team that was sent in to work in that disaster. "After we finished rescuing people, they asked us to rescue animals," he said. "And we were at a loss. In a flood, you just don't put a large animal in the boat with you."

After Hurricane Floyd, McKinney said, the state asked all the counties to update their emergency operations plans to include policies and procedures for rescuing animals in disasters or emergencies. That meant identifying agencies that should be involved and who needed to be contacted, including a call-down list of veterinarians that work with large animals. Burke County Emergency Services decided to do more, organizing three-days of large-animal rescue training for emergency workers. They learned about equipment needed to extricate animals from precarious situations, medications that can be utilized to calm traumatized animals and generally how to behave around animals in distress.

The Los Angeles County Department of Animal Care and Control established the LA County Equine Response Team, which is made up of experienced volunteers who are trained and ready to help the department evacuate large animals during emergency situations. Team members have to complete an extensive large animal handling training program and learn how to work with frightened animals in difficult situations. Putting together the Equine Response Team involved two years of intense development and the cooperation and involvement of staff not only from the Department of Animal Care and Control, but the Fire Department, the Sheriff's Department, Risk Management, the California Highway Patrol and county attorneys.

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