

# The role of the equine practitioner in disasters

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The health and well-being of horses can be adversely affected during natural disasters such as severe storms, floods, fires, hurricanes, tornadoes, or earthquakes. Equine practitioners are uniquely qualified to diagnose and treat injuries and stresses affecting horses during disasters and understand the logistics associated with rapid or planned evacuations of horses. Planning for disasters is often overlooked during the day-to-day operations of a busy equine practice; however, disaster planning is an important service that can benefit horse owners within a community. The purpose of this report is to briefly describe the important role equine practitioners have in disaster preparation, emergency response and rescue, and veterinary care of horses after a disaster has occurred.

## Disaster Preparation

The most important role equine practitioners play is educating clients regarding disaster preparedness. Effective approaches to disaster preparedness save more lives than any type of disaster response.<sup>1</sup> Equine practitioners can educate local horse owners by giving seminars and presentations at pony clubs, 4-H, and other community equine forums. During these presentations, questions should be posed as to what each horse owner would do if they were without power for 3 days, had to evacuate all the horses on their premises, or if their structures were destroyed. Do they have resources available to evacuate all their horses quickly? Can they provide food and water for their horses for 3 days without power or outside help? Do they have adequate materials to securely identify evacuated and abandoned horses so that ownership cannot be challenged? Horse owners should also be educated about the ways horses respond to different types of disasters and the most common injuries sustained. Distribution of pamphlets describing the essentials of disaster planning should be as much a routine part of equine practice as is distribution of information on vaccinations or parasite control. Prepared pamphlets can be accessed and printed from the California Department of Food and Agriculture website ([www.cdffa.ca.gov/programs/disasterprep/animals.html](http://www.cdffa.ca.gov/programs/disasterprep/animals.html)).

Practitioners may also play a critical role in developing local disaster response plans and setting up volunteer disaster response teams. Key components of a county disaster plan include identification of alternate animal housing, feed and water supplies, sources of tack and animal housekeeping materials, and means of mass transport during evacuations. Housing options for horses include fairgrounds, stables or racetracks, sale yards, rodeo arenas, local educational institutions,

producers, ranchers, and private individuals. Food resources include feed stores, hay brokers, local boarding and breeding facilities, ranchers, and private individuals. Important supplies for use in disasters include halters, lead ropes, blankets, bedding, wheelbarrows, rakes, pitchforks, buckets, hoses, fly spray, chlorine bleach, disinfectant, and lime. Researching possible donors and stockpiling these materials in advance facilitates rapid distribution during times of need. Supplies practitioners may be best equipped to provide include common medications, intravenous fluids, leg wraps and bandages, vaccines, and ambulatory clinic facilities. Common resources for animal transport and evacuation include local horsemen's associations or riding clubs, private horse trailers, horse transportation companies, local cattlemen's associations, ranchers, and livestock transportation companies. Often, residents are only allowed to leave and return to the disaster site once or twice before they are barred from reentry. Therefore, a key to successful evacuation of animals is educating clients about the importance of maintaining adequate transportation to evacuate all animals within 1 or 2 trips. Because many resources may also be used during disasters for human care and response, it is important to work with your local Office of Emergency Services (OES) to incorporate a plan for animals into the county's disaster plan for humans. Animal control and local humane associations should also be involved. A free step-by-step manual on developing animal disaster plans and response teams is available at [www.vetmed.ucdavis.edu/vetext/home.html](http://www.vetmed.ucdavis.edu/vetext/home.html). Other useful resources are the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Animals in Emergencies course ([www.fema.gov/fema/anemer.htm](http://www.fema.gov/fema/anemer.htm)).

During large declared disasters, equine practitioners must be able to effectively interact with individuals controlling movement of people and animals in the area impacted. A plan must be in place so that equine practitioners' skills and resources are efficiently used. In addition, evacuation sites and sources of food and supplies must be identified to ensure adequate care of displaced horses. A County Animal Coordinator should be identified to serve in the OES, and this person should act as a point of contact for animal issues. Equine practitioners involved in disaster relief should be knowledgeable and part of the Disaster Service Worker plan for their area. This may require interfacing with Animal Control and the county OES coordinator. If a practitioner wishes to participate in field response, he or she will be required to take a course on the Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS) and become certified as a Disaster Service Worker. By learning the components of the county disaster plan and the SEMS and becoming a registered Disaster Service Worker, equine practitioners can be extremely effective during disasters. Each state veteri-

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nary organization should have an effective disaster plan for animals that includes horses. This plan should interface with existing state plans and have an assigned large animal coordinator in the state OES for animal issues. Equine practitioners should meet at least yearly to review the availability of resources and plans for the following year.

## Rescue

Rescue of horses trapped or stranded during a disaster may require services that only veterinarians are qualified to offer, including physical examination and assessment, chemical restraint, emergency treatment of wounds or other conditions, or assessment of permanent irreparable injury for which humane destruction is required to prevent suffering.<sup>2,3</sup> To perform these duties, veterinarians must be able to enter disaster areas once they are stabilized but closed to all but emergency personnel. To gain entry, animal control or another supervising body must be contacted to coordinate immediate rescue and care of animals left behind in an evacuation. In addition, veterinarians should be aware of potential hazards following a flood, fire, or hurricane<sup>4</sup> and be trained in safety techniques and appropriate use of necessary equipment.<sup>5</sup> Specialized approaches may be required to rescue individual horses, including helicopter airlift, if no

other means exist.<sup>6</sup> Providing horses with on-site food, water, and medical treatment until transportation or other resources become available can mitigate pain and suffering. When animal holding facilities are damaged and horses are loose, it is important that attempts be made to separate stallions or aggressive horses and group horses under safe circumstances until alternate housing can be located. Loose horses can be dangerous to approach, and only experienced individuals should be allowed to assist with animal capture, identification, and rescue.

## References

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