

NEWS RELEASE

Texas Animal Health Commission

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For Immediate Release--

Prepared for Disaster? What about your animals?

Some gut-wrenching scenes are never forgotten. An elderly woman clutches her cat as she waits to be rescued from her flood-ravaged home. A dog clings desperately to a rooftop, inches from the rising water, dead livestock float among the sodden logs or debris, or half-buried animals struggle to escape from the mud.

"Whether it's a hurricane, flood, wildfire, or other natural or manmade disaster--an animal evacuation plan can make the difference between life, death, or tremendous suffering for pets and livestock," said Dr. Mark Michalke, a field veterinarian for the Texas Animal Health Commission (TAHC) and leader of the Evacuation Committee for the Texas Emergency Response Team (TERT).

TERT was originally formed by the TAHC, the state's livestock health regulatory agency, and Texas staff from the US Department of Agriculture's Veterinary Services to address devastating foreign pests, diseases, or bioterrorism. On the governor's emergency management team, TERT serves with the Texas Department of Health, in collaboration with the Texas Veterinary Medical Association and other livestock and health agencies.

TERT members quickly recognized the need to address animal evacuation in disasters, particularly after Texas' devastating October 1998 flood, in which more than 23,000 head of cattle drowned. Another 400 head of hogs, sheep, equine and poultry also were killed in the violent storm that struck 21 counties in south-central Texas.

"Most shelters will not accept pets, so it's important to know ahead of time where animals can be housed," commented Dr. Michalke. He said that, in addition to their normal duties, the eight - member evacuation committee has worked nearly a year to develop a database of veterinary practitioners, kennels, interested persons and organizations willing to give animals safe haven during an emergency. The committee has contacts for "cowboy help" to round up animals, and with livestock haulers.

"No one wants to leave their pets, horses or other stock to drown, burn, or suffer in a natural or man-made disaster. Establish a relationship with animal housing facilities outside your area before a crisis and keep phone numbers and addresses handy," said Dr. Michalke. "Calling ahead to reserve space also will increase your chances of gaining space for your animals."

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Dr. Michalke said an emergency evacuation kit for animals should be maintained in an easily accessible place. Keep an adequate supply of clean water and food, collars or bridles, leashes or leads, medicines and health records--including proof of rabies vaccinations or for equine, test documents for Equine Infectious Anemia (EIA) or "Coggins." If animals are evacuated, he said owners should carry several photos of their animals to aid in identification, as pets may be shuffled from one site to another during a chaotic situation.

"In the 1998 flood, there was no clean water available for the animals that survived the initial devastation. Livestock or pet food supplies may be limited after disaster hits, so make certain your emergency kit has plenty. If you have large animals, such as horses or other livestock, plan an evacuation route," he said. "Leave early and allow time for hauling. Don't wait until roads become congested or impassable, as this will stress the animals."

Dr. Michalke said a number of livestock markets and fairgrounds have agreed to serve as holding sites during an emergency. He noted that, in the 1998 flood, several of these facilities provided shelter for livestock that survived being washed from their pastures. County extension agents and TAHC livestock inspectors worked to match owners with their strayed stock, using information provided by brands and ear tags.

"Despite all planning, we will have to deal with strays, displaced and dead animals after a disaster situation. TERT can assist with identification, restraint and capture of animals, and disposing of carcasses to protect public health," said Dr. Michalke. "These are the skills we've developed for addressing a disease outbreak or bioterrorism. With more than 45 million people and 2.5 million animals traveling internationally each year, it's only a matter of time before bacteria, viruses or pests will 'hitch a ride' into the U.S."

"Nine TAHC veterinarians and several USDA veterinarians in Texas are trained as foreign animal disease diagnosticians, but it's the animal owners who are the 'front lines' for recognizing threats," he said.

"Besides knowing how and where to move animals in a disaster, be aware of and report potential signs of a foreign animal disease," Dr. Michalke said. He advised owners to report any of the following danger signs:

- sudden, unexplained death loss in a herd or flock
- severe illness affecting a high percentage of animals
- blistering around an animal's mouth, nose, teats or hooves
- unusual ticks or maggots
- staggering, falling or central nervous system disorders exhibited by the animal.

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"Call your veterinary practitioner first," he said. "Also notify the nearest TAHC area office, the central headquarters in Austin at 1-800-550-8242, or the USDA in Austin at 512-916-5555." Dr. Michalke said the TAHC and USDA does not charge to investigate possible animal diseases or pests. Specimens and samples are collected and shipped to state or federal laboratories.

"Immediate response is crucial in an outbreak," he said. "The first 24 hours are the most important for stopping a disease or pest 'dead in its tracks' before it can spread. Millions of dollars could be lost overnight in an outbreak, due to restricted trade opportunities, costs for fighting disease and the loss of animals."

"In addition to its huge pet population, Texas ranks tops for the nation in the production of cattle, sheep and goats, horses and exotic hoofstock," he noted. "Furthermore, the state ranks sixth for poultry production and 19th for swine. With billions of dollars, millions of animals' lives, and thousands of industry jobs on the line, it pays to be prepared to fight disasters, disease and pests."

Dr. Michalke said the TERT team is eager to share its information with groups anywhere in the state. To book a TERT representative, call your TAHC area office or the Austin headquarters at 1-800-550-8242.