

Emergency Preparedness for Animals

By Robert Bettey, DVM

Robert Bettey, DVM, writes this month's article. Bob is a local veterinarian and long time member of the Nellie Gail Emergency Preparedness Committee. Bob plays a critical role in our emergency planning for the equestrian center, as well as with our communications and security plans. Thank you Bob for your contributions to our community!

When a disaster strikes, you'll be ready to make the best of a bad situation because you've given thought to what you'll need and have made an effort to be prepared, but what about your pets? Well, they're going to prepare too. Unfortunately, they're going to prepare for the disaster the same way they prepare for every day – by depending completely and totally on you for everything they need.

To provide for your pets in an emergency you'll need to be aware that they may not behave as they usually do. They will experience the same changes you do but they will be unable to comprehend them. They may be scared, fences may be down, safe water may not be flowing from you taps and it may be very difficult to get them food and supplies.

Just as with us, shelter and water are at the top of the list of necessities for survival of your pets. Even though Fluffy and Muffin may have never seen a crate or carrier, it's a good idea to have one available for each of them. Just as you will feel uneasy from changes in your life, so will your pets. Pets that are normally social and get along well with each other may become frightened and revert more to their innate self-preservation skills. Having a separate "safe" carrier for each pet may prevent him or her from injuring one another.

Arrangements should also be made for large animals too. Since we can't build separate emergency housing for them, we need to find another means to keep them safe in the event their shelter is destroyed or becomes structurally unsound. Using a neighbor's livestock area is the best option but portable corrals or livestock panels can work very well. Another option is to have a long cotton rope and a stake to anchor it in your yard or available field. Admittedly, staking a horse that's not accustomed to it can create injuries but it's exponentially better than letting them roam free in the city. Halters and lead ropes are a must have item. They need to be located close to the stall where emergency personnel can easily find them and each should be labeled with contact and location of origin information. Finding where a horse came from

is often very difficult following mass evacuations. Broodmare collars that clip around the neck with owner ID and information work well in an emergency and don't interfere with haltering or transporting. Micro chipping is another safe and effective means to identify your pets should they escape or be transported to an unknown location.

Reptiles are much easier to move if need be. They can be safely kept, temporarily, in a pillowcase for transportation. Birds, hamsters and the pet chinchilla will likely be at home in their normal residences but consideration needs to be given to transport if they live in large cages. If you need to leave your home to survive, so do your pets. Be aware that most shelters for people will not accommodate pets in an emergency.

Now that you have safe shelter for your pets, let's consider water. Most animals can only survive a few days without water. If you own a Kangaroo Rat that can extract water from the seeds it eats, water isn't a problem. (However, owning an endangered species may be a problem.) Dogs and cats are relatively easy to take care of by storing bottled water. They each require about 2 to 3 cups of water per day per 25 pounds. In the case of horses, dehydration is a much bigger problem. A horse can become seriously sick and dehydrated in as little as one day. On average, a horse in this area requires about 9 gallons of water a day to survive at rest. If they are working, that amount can double. Most emergency advisors recommend keeping a 3-day supply of water on hand for individuals – the "72 Hour" kit. For livestock this is totally inadequate; when first responders arrive on the scene in 72 hours, they aren't going to arrive in potable water trucks. Prepare for your horse being without water for at least a week. That means one 55-gallon drum for each horse in your care for each week they may be without water. Water drums can be placed adjacent to the stall so you can use the water and refill the drums periodically, once every 2 months is recommended. The water should be periodically replaced to keep it fresh. A good practice is to use the water in the drums for your horse from time to time so they will get used to the taste and smell of the water before they are forced to drink it in an emergency.

Most of us have more than a week's food on hand for even our largest pets, so in most cases food shouldn't require great amount of special consideration.

Finally, keep a list of friends that can board your horse and care for your small animals in case you need to leave the area and can't take them with you. Hopefully, if you stay, their comfort will be greatly improved by the time you've spent preparing for the disaster before it happens.