

Pet And Animal Sheltering Complicates Emergency Readiness

by TOM BANSE



Photo courtesy of American Humane Association



Photo courtesy of American Humane Association

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PORTLAND - If you watched some of last month's coverage of Superstorm Sandy, you probably saw rescues of people who refused to evacuate. Many stayed behind despite the danger to be with their pets.

Emergency shelters for people usually don't let you bring your house pets or livestock along. The same issue cropped up here during wildfire season last summer. And it could loom over the next flood or earthquake.

Oregon Humane Society trainer Jo Becker starts a recent workshop in Portland with a slide montage of Hurricane Sandy scenes.

During Hurricane Sandy, some people who stayed put to be with their pets drowned in their own homes.

"Emergency shelters won't accept animals," Becker says. "If you're lucky, people and animal shelters will be located close to each other."

It's nationwide policy to keep pets, except for service animals, out of human shelters.

Becker says, "They don't accept animals in the shelters because of public health issues."

And allergies, and the potential for animals to fight with each other, bite, and so forth.

According to the pet products industry, the majority of American households own pets. So what do you do?

In the audience, Wendy Colvin asks herself that. She lives on a country acre near Canby, Oregon.

"We own two pygmy goats and about a dozen chickens," she says.

After Hurricane Katrina, Colvin learned about helping humans recover from catastrophe when she volunteered with Mennonite Disaster Services. But as for her animals, "I hadn't really thought about it before."

Colvin says emergency shelter rules forbidding pets create something of a puzzle.

"If we had to move them we would probably put them into the pickup truck and take them wherever we had to go."

About two hours north — near Olympia, Washington — vet tech Hollie Smith has a plan for her menagerie. Smith owns two cats, a dog and two pet rabbits. She's packed plastic totes with seven days of pet litter, food and toys. She has pet carriers and a collapsible playpen for the rabbits at the ready.

"They're actually more prepared than I am prepared."

But personal preparedness isn't good enough for Smith.

"My biggest thing is getting the government to realize that animals need to be part of the solution and part of the plans. Otherwise, they are going to be a major hiccup, a major problem."

When Smith inquired about her own county's shelter plan for animals, she found it wanting. So she volunteered to work on an animal and agriculture disaster plan for Thurston County Emergency Management.

Now she's glad to report progress.

"We're looking at several different horse arenas, horse stable facilities, dairy farms. We have a couple of dairy farms, or cattle farms, that have gone out of business. The properties are there. They have everything there on the property, stables and all that stuff. We could just come in and use them."

Thurston County is one of many Northwest places working on planning better for animals in disasters. Others include Pacific County in southwest Washington, Portland and Lewiston, Idaho.

A little-known post-Hurricane Katrina reform called the federal PETS Act requires state and local governments to plan for animals in emergencies, though it's unclear how or if that law is enforced. All the same, Smith echoes something you'll also hear from emergency managers... the government cannot do it all in the immediate aftermath, so you should prepare to be self-sufficient. A good rule of thumb is: Whatever you do for yourself to get ready, do the same thing for your animals.

The American Humane Society has some other tips to prepare pet owners for disasters: Have a pet carrier at the ready and practice using it, and make a list of pet friendly hotels or boarding facilities in your area.

On the Web:

[Oregon Humane Society - Disaster Preparedness](#)

[Idaho Bureau of Homeland Security - Pet Preparedness](#)

[Jo Becker's animals in disasters handouts](#)

[American Humane Association - Community Preparedness](#)

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