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Apple Valley Plans For Evacuating Animals Large and Small

The Town of Apple Valley won the Grand Prize in the Public Safety category of the 2004 California Cities Helen Putnam Award for Excellence.

The Willow Fire of 1999 charred more than 52,000 acres, including a large portion of southern Apple Valley in San Bernardino County. But while emergency management operations were in place and activated for the evacuation, care and shelter of residents, a similar response mechanism was not in place for animals - the residents' cherished pets and livestock.

The Town of Apple Valley is located in the Mojave Desert. People live here because they enjoy the clean air, rural atmosphere and large residential lots. They also live here because it allows them to own livestock - horses, cows, sheep and pigs - in addition to domestic pets. People have animals because they love them, and their pets' safety during a disaster is as important as their own.

When the Willow Fire struck unincorporated Apple Valley, town animal control officers assisted with evacuating animals. They witnessed firsthand the chaos that developed without a definitive animal evacuation plan and recognized that, in the face of danger, residents need a comfort level for the safety of their animals. With 20 percent of the town's residents owning large animals, an emergency evacuation system had to be developed.

Pet Evacuation Plan Drafted

The first draft of the animal evacuation plan was completed in early 2002. It was adopted by the town council a few months later and serves as a formal addition to the town's emergency operation plan. Because the plan's true test could be at one of the town's worst moments, the plan is a work in progress.

The plan outlines the general principles for animal care during emergencies. The first priority is to move the animals to an area that is safe and meets the animal's immediate needs, such as food, water, shelter and medical treatment. The plan establishes an identification procedure for each animal as well as a method for sheltering lost or stray animals. Beyond the immediate needs of the animals, the plan also covers disaster recovery, including foster care, reuniting animals with owners, long-term medical care and disposal.

During emergency operations, the animal coordinator is a representative from the Apple Valley Animal Care and Control Division, who takes charge of all animal evacuation and shelter operations in the town. Each animal control truck is equipped with an emergency response box that includes a copy of the plan, as well as the forms and supplies necessary to activate it.

The plan includes the protocol and procedures for coordinating efforts with the emergency operations center, communications, and procedures for working with volunteers and the media.

Recommendations include developing a staging area where agencies and volunteers will congregate with trucks, horse trailers, 4-wheel drive vehicles and other necessary equipment. A check-in and briefing will be held prior to "dispatching" these responders to neighborhoods to rescue animals.

The plan also includes the methodology for organizing an efficient animal field shelter to ensure the safety and security of each animal from the point of registration to the time the animal is reunited with its owner. A carefully planned checklist includes designation of areas for registration, separate kennels for different types of animals, separate areas for sick or in-jured animals, equipment storage and distribution and dead animal disposal (including health and safety considerations for humans and animals).

Because animal evacuation can be an overwhelming operation, it is necessary to develop a reliable core of volunteers. A current project is developing Friends of Animals During Disasters (FADD). The town's animal control supervisor and the district's emergency preparedness manager are working together to create a group of reliable volunteers who can assist with transportation and evacuation procedures, as well as field shelter assistance.

FADD volunteers started a training program in August to learn the basics of team organization, activation procedures, plan implementation and emergency preparedness. Once fully trained, FADD will be included

in the plan, and its members will be registered as disaster service workers under the "Animal Rescue, Care and Shelter" classification approved by the California Emergency Council.

The Plan in Action

In October 2003, the wildfires that struck portions of San Bernardino County threatened the town of Apple Valley as well (see "Into the Fire," page 22). While the town was fortunate not to be a direct victim of the fire, Apple Valley's emergency operations center was activated to support evacuees from the mountain communities. The San Bernardino County Animal Control Department requested the establishment of a large-animal shelter in the high desert, anticipating that the evacuation route for mountain evacuees would bring them directly to this area.

A field shelter site was selected that would be easily accessible for the evacuees. Signage was displayed along the evacuation route to direct them to the shelter. Upon arrival, each animal was properly registered and tagged. Veterinary services were requested for a couple of animals that were sick. Because of the efficiency of the registration process, the animals' owners were promptly notified and gave permission for treatment.

The San Bernardino County Sheriff's Posse provided 24-hour on-site security. Other citizens volunteered to help with registration and care and feeding (ultimately leading to the development of FADD). The site was set up and managed according to plan, which led to its successful operation.

At its peak of operation, the animal shelter was home to more than 90 horses and assorted llamas, ponies, sheep and pigs. Overall, the animal shelter operated smoothly from set-up to demobilization six days later. At the time the animals were reunited with their owners, compliments and letters of appreciation poured in from very thankful owners. The County of San Bernardino Animal Care and Control Department also endorsed the efficiency of the shelter with a certificate of appreciation.

Neighboring cities have requested copies of the plan to begin the process of developing one of their own. That may be the greatest compliment for the time and effort invested in the development of the animal evacuation plan - when others recognize its value.

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