How Is Animal Welfare Addressed in Canada's Emergency Response Plans?

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How Is Animal Welfare Addressed in Canada’s Emergency Response Plans?

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In 2005, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita clearly revealed that even in the United States the welfare of companion animals and nonhuman animals in the wild, zoo, or aquarium was not considered within the evacuation plans for their human caretakers (owners). The lack of proper planning and trained individuals resulted in a huge loss of animal life as well as suffering and trauma to both animals and their owners. The present Canadian Federal Emergency Response Plan does not have adequate procedures for the evacuation of animals together with their owners, nor do Canada or the provinces and territories have a plan in place that consists of properly trained and equipped individuals to respond to this aspect of disaster management. The Canadian Veterinary Reserve (CVR) was thus organized at a national level to respond properly to disasters or emergencies of all types and thereby reduce animal suffering and loss of life. This article describes the formation of the CVR and its anticipated national role in addressing animal welfare during times of catastrophic need.

The only thing more difficult than preparing for a disaster is trying to explain why you didn’t. (Evans, 2002, p. 797)

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In 2005, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita tore through the lower southern United States, devastating Mississippi and Louisiana in particular. The infrastructure that was in place to evacuate and shelter humans quickly collapsed as the demands placed upon it overwhelmed its capacity. At the time, there were no regulations concerning the evacuation and care of companion animals or the removal to safety of livestock or wildlife. It was difficult to estimate the number of nonhuman animals who were left behind or affected by hurricanes Katrina and Rita (Figure 1). However, some of the most reliable numbers reveal the following facts:

**FIGURE 1** This is a picture of the sheltering area at one of the major Humane Society of the United States animal rescue centers at Hattiesburg, Mississippi. Note both larger stall and caging available to handle the large volumes and variety of species who need help. Picture courtesy of Oceanographic Environmental Research Society.
1. More than 217,000 dogs and 247,000 cats were directly affected due to being left behind by the 1 million humans evacuated (Chapman, 2006);
2. 50,000+ companion animals, both domestic and feral, were left behind in their homes or loose (Upman, 2006);
3. 10,000+ cattle were killed or displaced (Clark, 2005);
4. 400 horses were moved from New Orleans alone with one animal shelter caring for 40 horses at one point (Clark);
5. Prior to Hurricane Rita’s arrival, more than 10,000 livestock animals had been sent to Texas, most of which were horses (Clark);
6. Almost all of the Aquarium of the Americas 10,000 fish were lost, and the aquarium had to send its penguin colony to Monterey Aquarium and its leafy and weedy sea dragon collection to the Dallas World Aquarium (Butler, 2005); and
7. The Audubon Zoo lost a pair of river otters and a whooping crane (Butler).

These two incidents prompted an investigation by the U.S. government into preparing a plan that would focus on the care of animals to lessen their suffering, prevent undue injury or death, and promote public safety. This resulted in the U.S. government passing the Pets Evacuation and Transportation Standards Act of 2006, making it law that pets must be evacuated with humans. This law has provided the necessary leverage to establish the infrastructure required to ensure that animals are cared for during disasters as they are now an official part of all U.S. emergency planning (Animal Law, 2007). Canada’s Emergency Response Plans should also recognize that disasters require an organized and well-prepared response for both animals and their owners. Such incidents that have occurred in Canada in the past include the ice storm in 1998. During this disaster, a large part of Ontario and Quebec were without power, which affected farms where 274,000 dairy cows and 40,000 sheep were being kept (Federal Emergency Management Agency, 2006; Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, 2003). The loss and suffering of animals on these farms were massive. The British Columbia avian flu epidemic in 2004 resulted in approximately 15.8 million birds being killed (British Columbia Government, 2004), again a disaster to both animals and humans. The continuing oil spills off the coast of Newfoundland kill approximately 300,000 birds each year (Environment Canada, 2002), with associated suffering of these birds that is difficult to quantify.

PRESENT CANADIAN POLICIES CONCERNING ANIMAL EVACUATIONS

When reflecting on these devastating numbers of animals dying from natural or human-created disasters, what guidelines exist to assist Canadians in caring for
their pets or livestock during such events? Looking at official policy when it comes to evacuating people and their pets, the owners of the animals are given three choices:

1. Take their pets with them;
2. Leave their pets at home with food and water; or
3. Leave their pets in the care of Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals or humane societies.

The following recommendations are from the Canadian federal government concerning the evacuation of humans and their pets:

Recommendation One: “Health & safety considerations do not permit lodging pets in the same space with people, with the possible exception of Seeing Eye dogs” (Lafond, 2002). Please note that this is excerpted exactly as worded from the document. The term “Seeing Eye dogs” is trademarked, and the more appropriate term today probably would be “service animals for the vision impaired.” That said, there are other service animals who should be, and are entitled to be, housed with their human clients. In our opinion, this entire issue should be revisited throughout emergency-preparedness documents.

Recommendation Two: “It is important, therefore, that appropriate planning measures for the emergency care of pets be discussed with SPCA workers or animal control officers in the community during planning stages” (Lafond, 2002). This has been the mantra for all levels of government if they pay attention to animal issues at all. However, it is clear that these organizations alone do not have the resources or capacity to deal with large-scale national disasters and it is inappropriate to “dump” this responsibility solely on them.

We quote from a fact sheet from the Ontario government that lists what to do with pets during an emergency:

If safety permits, take your pet with you! Pets should not be left behind during an evacuation … as they may be injured, lost or even killed as a result of the emergency. It is important to note that some evacuation centres may not accept pets, with the exception of service animals (e.g., guide-eye dogs). Please do research ahead of time to ensure that you are not separated from your animal. (Pets and Emergencies, 2004)

This recommendation is not terribly useful because it puts the onus squarely on the owners and places them in an untenable situation. Don’t leave your pet, but shelters will not take them. What does that leave as an option?

At a municipal or local level, there seems to be a lack of support of any kind or potentially a sense of panic at being overwhelmed at the magnitude of responsibilities. As an example, the city of Barrie seems to have no section dealing with
animals within its Emergency Response Plan. On the city’s Web site, there is a “tips” section for emergency preparedness for pets that sends the reader to the Ontario SPCA Web site for further information (City of Barrie, 2007). That site states that in Ontario, the responsibility “for the safety and survival of pets ultimately rests with pet owners throughout the entire duration of an emergency” (Schafer, n.d.).

A manager of an Ontario humane society, in a personal communication, wrote the following:

As the manager of a small, rural humane society, I was feeling quite overwhelmed and nearing a state of panic after the first four sessions of the Caring During Crisis symposium. Knowing that our territory spans five different municipalities, the magnitude of my responsibilities became frightening. Not only would we have companion animals to potentially rescue and shelter, there are all the farm animals to consider as well. Taking into account the staff and volunteer base I have to work with, I was convinced of one Thing—we’re screwed! (E. Longman, May 2007)

Pandemics, hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, severe winter and summer storms, fire, oil spills, and food poisonings are some of the emergencies that the authorities expect the public, livestock producers, and humane societies to prepare for and cope with. It is quite obvious from the previously described status that any of these disasters could quickly overwhelm local or regional emergency response plans. With this in mind, the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA) recognized the necessity to establish plans to rescue, care, and treat animals during and following disasters. The CVMA, in cooperation with the federal government, is taking the lead in setting up an effective national response system. This system is called the Canadian Veterinary Reserves (CVR; see Table 1). Its mission is to do the following:

1. Assist governments with animal health emergencies;
2. Be the central resource where Canadian veterinarians can provide their expertise and services;
3. Assist in emergencies to benefit both animals and society;
4. Supplement existing response capabilities of the federal and provincial governments;
5. Augment Canada’s capacity to contain animal disease outbreaks;
6. Lessen the impact of a civil emergency on human and animal populations; and
7. Provide Canada with additional flexibility to increase support for international animal disease control efforts.
The CVR has two main objectives:

1. Provide surge capacity for Canadian Food Inspection Agency (primarily foreign animal disease outbreaks) and
2. Provide the civil component (primarily noninfectious disasters).

On the civil side, the CVR plan includes three equally critical components:

1. Veterinarians who will provide animal medical diagnoses and treatment and issues concerning human health;
2. Animal health technicians who will provide animal medical care and support; and
3. Nongovernment organizations (NGOs) who will deal with rescue, shelter, daily care, and logistics of the animals. This will be coordinated under the lead NGO, the Oceanographic Environmental Research Society, and its Disaster Preparedness Division.

The CVR will create a system that is in place prior to any disaster to assist in the rapid assessment, deployment, and communication of the three components through constant training—including simulation exercises. Any issues such as centralized chain of command, licensure of veterinarians or animal health technicians, and rapid access to resources (funds and equipment) would be agreed to and finalized in advance. As well, the CVR must be linked to National Emergency Response Plans at all levels of government that are currently in place to ensure that
the CVR is included and able to assist in a timely manner for all disasters so declared.

The importance and necessity of the CVR in Canada is obvious. There are an estimated 5 million owned (nonferal) dogs across Canada and an undocumented number of cats (Goodpooch, 2006). Looking within the city of Toronto, estimates for owned (nonferal) dogs are at 180,000 and 300,000 cats, with feral cats estimated as high as a further 250,000 (Allemang, 2005). If only half the city of Toronto were involved in a major disaster, it would mean the rescue or evacuation of 365,000 animals, which is very similar to the Hurricane Katrina numbers described at the beginning of this article. This underscores the essential role of the CVR to Canada’s Emergency Response Plans in addressing animal welfare and protecting human health during, or after, an emergency. It is essential that all levels of government recognize the importance and necessity of the CVR and fully support its mandates and all of its needs in order to truly support all the pet owners, livestock producers, and humane societies who would require the CVR’s services.

REFERENCES


