



MD. Readies For Animal Rescues In Emergencies

By Ted Shelsby

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State aims to include pets, farm animals in rescues

As rescue workers saw during Hurricane Katrina, the bond between people and their pets can be a powerful one.

In many cases, people refused to be rescued from their homes and taken out of harm's way if it meant leaving their cat, dog or herd of farm animals behind.

Avoiding that scenario in the future was the impetus behind federal legislations signed earlier this month by President Bush requiring states to establish plans for the evacuation of pets and farm animals as part of their emergency response procedures.

Officials at the Maryland Department of Agriculture say they have begun taking steps to comply with the measure.

Jacob Casper, a veterinarian and coordinator of disaster services at the MDA, is leading the effort. He said he hopes to have "bare bones" volunteer state animal response teams (SART) in every county with six months to a year.

The teams would work with fire and rescue personnel to save pets and farm animals along with people.

In some cases such operations would involve navigating a boat through fast-flowing floodwaters to retrieve a dog from a rooftop or moving a herd of heifers to higher ground before a hurricane strikes.

"We would like to have a system in place that if we knew of an impending disaster, such as a flood, we could move farm animals out to safe areas in advance," Casper said.

The department will hold a training session at Timonium Fairgrounds next spring on how to rescue horses, Casper said.

Subsequent sessions will address saving other farm animals, including cows, pigs, goats and chickens.

"We need volunteers, probably a hundred, or more, in every county," he said.

The programs will require volunteers with an assortment of skills who could be on call around the clock.

"We need people to run animal shelters," he said. "We need people to care for animals, to feed animals and to provide basic sanitation. We need people at the emergency operation centers to answer the telephones. We need people with swift-water training to rescue animals."

Each SART center also would have equipment including boats, front-end loaders, backhoes and trucks to transport animals.

Casper said that each center would need to locate animal shelters where pets and farm animals could be taken after being rescued. Animal cages and an assortment of foods need to be stockpiled.

Maryland's program will be patterned after North Carolina's plan, Casper said.

North Carolina began requiring county emergency plans to include the rescue of animals after Hurricane Floyd killed more than 3 million pets and farm animals in 1999.

The federal legislation was prompted by reports of pets being stranded last year during Katrina and the criticism of rescue agencies for its "no pets" policy.

Forty-four percent of the people who refused to evacuate their homes during Katrina said they didn't want to leave their pets, according to a survey released in April by the Fritz Institute, a San Francisco-based non-profit organization involved in humanitarian relief efforts.

"Some of those people died," Casper said.

Sixty-three percent of American homes have at least one pet, according to the Humane Society of the United States.

Twelve states, including Pennsylvania, have SART programs. Five others - Louisiana, Texas, Kentucky, Michigan and Virginia - are in the process of developing plans.

Kate Wagner, a spokeswoman for the Maryland Department of Agriculture, said that anyone interested in volunteering for the program can contact the Maryland Veterinary Medical Association office in White Marsh, 410-931-3332.