

States must help save pets New law puts funds at risk if animals are not in disaster plans

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Washington -- States will be required to help evacuate pets during a natural disaster such as a hurricane or earthquake or risk losing federal money under a bill signed Friday by President Bush.

The bill was prompted by reports that as many as 50,000 pets were stranded during Hurricane Katrina. Rescue agencies have been criticized for the "no pets" policy that required pet owners to abandon their animals or defy evacuation orders and stay in the disaster area. Nearly half of those who refused to evacuate said they didn't want to leave their pets behind, according to an April poll by the Fritz Institute, a nonprofit agency involved with providing humanitarian relief work.

"Katrina gave us insight into the lack of preparedness for people and their pets," said Michael Markarian, executive vice president of the Humane Society of the United States, an animal advocacy group that rescued thousands of abandoned pets during and after the hurricane. Markarian said that even disabled people with guide dogs were being forced to choose between their pets and their safety.

Though many states have responded to criticism of the "no pets" policy and now incorporate pets' needs in their evacuation strategies, the federal law will require all states to present the Federal Emergency Management Agency with pet evacuation plans before receiving federal funds for emergency preparedness.

The law also authorizes FEMA to provide additional money to create pet-friendly shelters and provide special assistance to pet owners.

"People victimized by disasters should not suffer needless additional injury by having to abandon their household pets or service animals to their fate," said Rep. Tom Lantos, D-San Mateo, who introduced the legislation after seeing television coverage of a young boy being separated from his dog after Katrina. "This country needs the force of federal law to protect people in large-scale emergencies who own household pets or service animals such as guide dogs."

A new state law sponsored by Assemblyman Leland Yee, D-San Francisco, assures that California will be in compliance with the new federal requirements, Markarian said. California's law requires state emergency agencies to coordinate with the Department of Agriculture -- which has jurisdiction over animal rescues -- to create a statewide policy for pet evacuations.

Markarian said the lack of coordination among FEMA, private rescue workers and Louisiana's agriculture department complicated rescue efforts during Katrina. "There was no clear policy on how to deal with this issue, and many responders showed great courage and compassion ... but we cannot rely on individual acts of kindness," Markarian said.

A Zogby poll from October 2005 reports that Americans, by 2-to-1 ratio, believe that rescue efforts

should include plans for accommodating pets, though only 4 percent say government agencies such as FEMA should be responsible for performing pet rescues. Instead, 42 percent say animal rights groups should conduct rescues, and 40 percent say the task should be shared among private groups, government agencies and individual pet owners.

A majority -- 54 percent -- say they disagree with the "no pets" policy used in Katrina's aftermath.