

What We Heard:

Companion Animal Emergency Response

Alberta Agriculture and Forestry

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Executive Summary

The purpose of this project was to gain an understanding of how pets have been accommodated in regional and provincial states of emergency involving evacuation of home owners. Interviews were conducted with 14 organizations and individuals who participated in the extraction, evacuation and care of companion animals during the wildfires in the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo (2016) and Slave Lake (2011), and the overland floods that impacted High River and Siksika Nation in southern Alberta (2013). Participants were asked to provide an overview of their involvement in the emergency response for pets, and to share their challenges, lessons learned and recommendations for future preparedness. This report is intended to capture the input and perspectives' of those who have participated in emergency response for animals and the content has not be edited by the authors.

Qualitative analysis of the interview data revealed the following themes:

- Key challenges were related to communication, leadership and the infrastructure.
- The importance of relationships within the animal welfare system became very clear over the course of this project. Organizations involved in animal welfare often work together and with the same organizations on multiple occasions. As a result, when it comes to emergencies, relationships rather than a systematic approach have driven who becomes involved.

The participants who were interviewed recommended that the extraction, evacuation and care of companion animals in emergencies, could be enhanced by:

- a) Development of an animal data management system for emergencies,
- b) Creating and maintaining contact lists of organizations with expertise and capacity,
- c) Supporting emergency response training for staff and volunteers of animal welfare organizations. Incident Command System (ICS) training was specifically noted,
- d) Creating opportunities to learn and prepare for emergencies based on collective past experience is a critical ingredient for success and responder well-being in the future.

A number of best practices for future responders were collated from the discussions. The response to animals arriving at evacuation centres, with their owners, was not considered in this report.

The companion animal responses for the wildfires in Slave Lake and Fort McMurray, and the flood in High River and Siksika Nation were carried out by teams of passionate and dedicated volunteers and organizations, and their efforts deserve praise and respect. In many cases, individuals were willing to ignore their personal discomfort and tragedies, instead putting every effort into ensuring that animals were cared for and safe. The efforts to evacuate and care for pets in all three emergencies were successful and animals were saved because of those efforts. Learning from these experiences will improve the response in the future.

Background

Since Hurricane Katrina in 2005, public and government attention has been drawn to the issue of animal rescue and evacuation during emergencies. It is estimated that more than 50,000 companion animals were abandoned during Hurricane Katrina and around 15,000 were rescued¹. After the hurricane, researchers found that approximately 44% of people who did not evacuate did so because they did not want to leave their pets. As a result of Hurricane Katrina, the United States *Pets Evacuation and Transportation Standards Act 2006*, was introduced to attempt to mitigate some of the risks related to animal evacuation and rescue. The Act requires “state and local emergency preparedness authorities [to] specify how they will accommodate families with pets or service animals in their emergency plans”². Through this example, as well as others, it can be seen that the emotional attachment pet owners have for their pets can have a significant impact on their decision making in emergencies. In an Australian study, 86% of those surveyed strongly agreed “that they considered pets to be a part of the family”³. It is conceivable that individuals who own pets may be more willing to put themselves at risk, either by choosing not to evacuate or returning to the disaster zone to retrieve their pets. Research has shown that the risk of failing to evacuate doubles for each additional pet dog or cat a household owns⁴. It is reasonable to conclude that in an emergency situation, the safety of the pets of evacuees has a direct impact on the safety of the evacuees and first responders. Within the borders of Alberta, we have experienced natural disasters that have resulted in emergency

¹ Taylor, M., *et al.* (2015). “The preparedness and evacuation behavior of pet owners in emergencies and natural disasters”. *Australian Journal of Emergency Management*. 30(2): 18-23.

² Pawsey, Cathy. (2015). “A state plan for animal welfare in emergencies: Victoria’s experience in developing and implementing a state animal welfare emergency plan”. *Australian Journal of Emergency Management*. 30(2): 9-12.

³ Westcott, Rachel. (2015). “People and their animals in emergencies: snapshots from past emergency events”. *Australian Journal of Emergency Management*. 30(2): 62-65.

⁴ Heath, S.E., *et al.* (2001). “Human and pet-related risk factors for household evacuation failure during a natural disaster”. *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 153(7): 655-659.

Millman, S. *et al.* (2006), “Panel Discussion Three: Addressing Animal Welfare in Emergency Response Planning”. *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science*. 11:173-184.

Wittnich, C. and Belanger, M. (2008). How is Animal Welfare Addressed in Canada’s Emergency Response Plans”. *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science*. 11:125-132.

evacuation measures for pets. Examples include the wildfires in the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo (2016) and Slave Lake (2011), and the floods that impacted Siksika Nation and High River (2013). For information on relevant legislation to this emergency situations in Alberta, see Appendix 1.

Fire - Lesser Slave Lake Region (2011)

In May 2011, approximately a quarter of the Town of Slave Lake was destroyed by wildfire, as well as a large number of structures in the neighbouring Municipal District of Lesser Slave River. This fire forced the evacuation of the community of approximately 10,000 residents. At the time, this was the largest emergency evacuation in Alberta's history⁵ and the first recorded event where responders went into houses to rescue animals left behind. As part of this incident, the extraction of pets from homes and evacuation to safe housing and care was an impromptu response undertaken by a small group of local volunteers from the Animal Rescue Committee of Slave Lake, officers with municipal bylaw, RCMP, and the Edmonton Humane Society. An estimated 200 to 300 pets were evacuated from the area. The pet extraction and evacuation activities were not officially integrated into the Regional Operations Centre, and the cost of the activities was primarily borne by the volunteers and their organizations.

Overland Flooding – High River and Siksika Nation (2013)

In June of 2013, overland flooding in southern Alberta affected a number of communities and forced the evacuation of 13,400 people from the Town of High River and residents of Siksika Nation, who were in many cases forced to leave their pets behind. The extraction and evacuation of approximately 1,100 animals⁶ was undertaken by first responders and non-government agencies. For pet rescue and other public safety measures homes were accessed through break and entry. During this incident the Town of High River worked with Heaven Can Wait Animal Rescue Foundation (the town's animal shelter service provider), local bylaw officers, RCMP, Fish and Wildlife officers, and Alberta Animal Rescue Crew Society (AARCS) to evacuate animals from their homes to safe keeping. Shelters and rescues across the province provided temporary lodging for rescued animals until they were reunited with their owners. AARCS and the Alberta Spay Neuter Taskforce worked with the nearby Siksika Nation to extract and evacuate pets.

⁵ Kulig, J.C., *et. al.* (2012). "The 2011 Slave Lake Fires: Lessons Learned". Retrieved from www.ruralwildfire.ca. 2.

⁶ High River Disaster Recovery Program Advocacy Committee. (2016). "Finish the Job. Fix the System: Recommendations for High River from Alberta's Disaster Recovery Program". The Town of High River. 4.

Fire - Fort McMurray and the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo (2016)

On May 1st, 2016, a wildfire was underway southwest of the city of Fort McMurray, Alberta. By May 3rd, the fire had swept through the city, leaving around 2,400 homes and buildings destroyed. It took more than two months for the fire to be declared under control, burning over 590,000 hectares⁷. The Horse River fire forced 80,000⁸ residents to evacuate from Fort McMurray and the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo (RMWB) on very short notice. In some cases, residents did not have the opportunity to return home and pets were left behind. In other situations evacuees were able to leave with their animals and arrived at reception centers with their animals.

A number of volunteers and agencies, some with emergency response expertise, self-deployed to the area to assist animals while others took to social media to initiate a response. The RMWB initially responded by providing aid to animals on site, then set in motion a plan to evacuate the animals to a staging area (Fort McMurray SPCA) and then to a pet reception centre in Edmonton. This event represents the first time that the animal response was incorporated into the Regional Operations Centre and recognized throughout the various levels of responders. The RMWB worked with first responders in Fort McMurray to coordinate the extraction of registered pets from homes through owner permission and lock smiths, and coordinated the care and control of the animals at a reception centre in Edmonton, through the Alberta Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Alberta SPCA). Registered pets were those registered on-line with the RMWB as being left behind in homes.

Of the 1,192 animals received in Edmonton, 93% were reunited with their owners. Statistics are not available for pets that were evacuated by other rescue initiatives or Good Samaritans. The Alberta SPCA worked with the RMWB to coordinate the Edmonton pet reception centre and was supported by the Alberta Veterinary Medical Association (ABVMA) and their membership; non-profit organizations, notably Alberta Animal Rescue Crew Society (AARCS), the Alberta Spay Neuter Taskforce, Edmonton Humane Society, Calgary Humane Society, Red Deer and District Humane Society, Meika's Birdhouse, Fort McMurray SPCA; and staff from Alberta Agriculture and Forestry (AF). The scale of the evacuation in Fort McMurray and the amount of time residents were restricted from returning to their homes was unique.

⁷ Ramsay, Caley; Shum, David (May 9, 2016). "'Ocean of fire' destroys 2,400 structures but 85% of Fort McMurray still stands". *Global News*.

⁸ Parsons, Paige (May 3, 2016). "Thousands flee from Fort McMurray wildfire in the largest fire evacuation in Alberta's history". *Edmonton Journal*. Postmedia Network. Archived from the original on May 10, 2016.

Purpose

The roles the provincial government, volunteers and non-government agencies have performed in regard to emergency animal response have varied depending on the situation. Most recently, staff from Agriculture and Forestry played a role in connecting the RMWB with organizations and expertise to assist with their pet response, as well as providing volunteers to assist with the reunification process. In the cases of Slave Lake and High River the involvement of Alberta Agriculture and Forestry were largely related to the evacuation of livestock, led by the Emergency Planning Section. No clear terms of engagement exist for an animal response; **however, the public has signalled that animal outcomes are an important component to emergency response in a community.** The purpose of this project is to gain an understanding of how pets have been accommodated in regional and provincial states of emergency involving evacuation of home owners and to reflect the experiences and learnings of the participants who were interviewed. For information on methodology, see Appendix 2.

What We Heard

From the analysis, three key sets of challenges were identified: those related to communications (both internal and external); those related to leadership (particularly planning and delegation); and those related to the infrastructure required to effectively evacuate and care for pets.

Communication

Communication was identified by all of those interviewed as a key challenge faced during the evacuation and care of animals in Slave Lake, High River, Siksika Nation and Fort McMurray. In general, stakeholders interviewed stressed the importance of proactive communication both internal (i.e. amongst volunteers, organizations and municipalities) and external (i.e. the public at large and the media). It is important to note that access to appropriate communication tools, such as email, cellphones and social media may be limited during an emergency. However, the effort to maintain the lines of communication during an emergency is emphasized, to manage the response and ensure the safety of responders, as well as to communicate with the public.

Internal

In order to achieve the best results, many organizations felt that information should be shared between organizations with regular updates regarding planning, progress, procedures and resource allocation in order to ensure volunteers understood the decisions made and the subsequent operational needs. Organizations involved in all three emergencies encountered instances where information that would have helped volunteers on the ground was not shared.

As these three emergencies progressed the roles and responsibilities became clearer and internal communications became freer and more efficient. A number of those interviewed had experience in both Fort McMurray and Slave Lake, and they noted that having daily, recorded, meetings that involved all team leads (including communications and leads off-site), were extremely helpful to ensuring correct information was being passed both up and down the chain of command.

External

Stakeholders noted that any and all communication with the public should be as proactive as possible, ensuring that pet owners know what to expect, how their pets will be cared for, and where to access information about their pets' whereabouts. Without strong messaging to the public through traditional and social media, members of the public are left to try and determine who to contact and where to look for pets on their own; this can lead to frustration at best, and at worst, panic. Many of those interviewed felt that at the outset of a response, a Public Information Officer (or Communications Team Lead) must be identified and briefed to effectively create messaging for the media. Daily updates should be provided to the media, including details of how the response is progressing, where evacuees can find information regarding their pets' whereabouts and ways for the broader public to contribute to the response.

It was noted that concerned people will reach out to multiple agencies that may or may not be involved directly in the response but are traditionally involved in animal welfare. These stakeholders are an important resource that can help to calm people and reduce miscommunication.

Leadership

In the three situations considered in this project the municipalities did not have a pre-existing emergency animal response plan for pets at the time that evacuation was necessary. As a result, leadership became one of the most important factors in order to extract animals from homes, shelter evacuated animals and contact owners. Without a plan in place, individuals and organizations took on positions of leadership and authority without clarity on their role, responsibilities, accountability and integration with the overall response. In contrast, supporting volunteers and agencies were expected to accept direction without an established relationship and chain of command.

While Alberta has been fortunate to have skilled flexible people and supportive volunteers, it is advised that the risk to animals and the "wear and tear" on people could be substantially

reduced through good planning and advanced decision making. Advanced planning would support and improve role clarity and relationship building, which are essential for a successful response.

Planning

The ability of municipalities and organizations to engage in emergency planning varies greatly depending on their capacity to dedicate resources to emergency management. A primary concern of the interviewees was the risk of “reinventing the wheel” if a process is not implemented to learn from our collective past. The participants interviewed strongly believe that a plan to care for and evacuate companion animals is necessary and should be created. The plan should: 1) be created in advance, 2) build on lessons learned from previous experiences, 3) be flexible enough that it can be adapted to various scales and types of emergencies.

The following issues of concern were voiced by participants as examples of the topics that should be resolved prior to an event:

- 1) Establish clarity around the legal authority to extract, evacuate, transport and care for animals so that it is clear who is making decisions on behalf of the animals and who is paying their bills, especially if the animals are transported outside the emergency zone.
- 2) Registration systems are required to notify responders of a pet in need and gather information, including how to gain entry into the home, contact information, pet particulars, etc..
- 3) Information privacy protection should be recognized and addressed as systems are built.
- 4) Permission must be provided by the home-owner to allow extraction teams to enter a home to retrieve an animal.
- 5) Extraction teams require animal handlers, peace officers and people familiar with the community. Sourcing all of the necessary expertise requires planning.
- 6) Knowledgeable animal management and handling experts are required for a broad range of animals, some with special needs.
- 7) Roles and responsibilities should be established from the outset of the incident, with a clear hierarchy identifying which organizations have decision-making authority. Incident Command System (ICS) training would be beneficial to organizations responsible for planning an emergency response and for volunteers participating, to learn how to operate within ICS.

- 8) The development in advance of an organizational chart and clear job descriptions would allow for the capacity, expertise and experience of organizations and municipalities to be determined before they are required. The capacity to serve particular roles varies across organizations because of the differing ability to access resources, training and their organizational mandates.

All of the stakeholders interviewed stressed that it is important for organizations to participate in ways that most effectively leverage their existing expertise, resources and experience.

Additionally, by taking stock of what resources and expertise are available, organizations and municipalities will be better able to identify gaps and make efforts to fill them.

Tools

As stated previously, the capacity of organizations and municipalities to respond during an emergency varies greatly depending on their access to dedicated resources, among other factors. Throughout this project, a number of key tools were noted as being extremely beneficial in responding to an emergency incident. Stakeholders noted that dedicated resources for the development of data management tools, emergency plans and emergency training would prepare organizations and municipalities for future emergencies involving animals.

Data Management

All individuals interviewed stressed the need for the development of an emergency database that can be populated and shared across organizations involved in an emergency (including contact information of pet owner, consent to enter home and retrieve animals, identifying information for the animal). This database could follow an animal through the entire evacuation and reunification process, including the initial request for evacuation from its owners, its initial intake after extraction, its intake at any secondary sites, and its final reunification with its owner. Ideally, this database would be integrated with the owner registration process and should be accessible at multiple sites simultaneously. With the creation of such a database, protecting the privacy of pet owners would be extremely important.

Planning

As was discussed in the previous section, the creation of emergency plans specific to the evacuation and care of companion animals would be greatly beneficial to participating organizations. Unfortunately, the capacity for municipalities to engage in this type of planning is very limited, especially in circumstances where there is no dedicated emergency manager or

staff responsible for emergency planning. Additionally, organizations and municipalities may not be fully aware of the resources and organizations available to them in an emergency. As such, the creation of a list of organizations with expertise and capacity to assist in companion animal evacuation and care that can be used by municipalities in planning and responding to emergencies might assist communities in preparing for emergencies. There are also a few municipalities in Alberta that already have or are in the process of developing emergency plans for companion animal evacuation and care. These plans could be used as a template for other municipalities across Alberta as part of the existing emergency planning process.

Training

It is likely impossible for anyone to be completely prepared for any emergency, but training in ICS and/or with the Canadian Disaster Animal Response Team (CDART) would likely be beneficial to the staff and volunteers of animal welfare organizations. This type of training would help individuals learn how to manage an emergency and identify potential problem areas before they arise. Additionally, in the aftermath of an emergency, it would be valuable for organizations to have mental health first aid training and the option to partake in counselling.

Best Practices

The best practices recommended by responders have been summarized below, in random order:

- Communicate with the public about an animal response as soon as possible to reduce panic. Share the message with the established animal welfare community across the province, so they can help spread the correct information.
- Multiple daily meetings (ideally three) should be held, with all team leads: a) record decisions for reference and distribution, b) provide a media update.
- Encourage the public to donate money rather than pet supplies. Supplies can be difficult to manage, store and transport to exactly where they are needed.
- Donation management planning and communication saves manpower, time and money.
- To avoid multiple home entries, extraction teams should leave a note on the exterior door of a home, upon departure, using masking tape with written notes, to indicate the date and animals removed (or not).
- Extraction should focus on highest need animals first (medical conditions, increased risk for dehydration, special needs)
- For efficiency, extraction teams should be coordinated and dispatched geographically.

- Extractions teams should include: a local person to help navigate, an animal handler, at least one peace officer, bylaw officer or police officer, and a locksmith if necessary.
- Volunteers working within an evacuation zone should have visual identification (on person and vehicle) to allow for easy identification by other first responders.
- Ensure first responders such as firefighters and police have ready access to animal support and/or have safety equipment and kennels so they can extract animals where they encounter them and prevent potential injuries.
- City buses are a good transportation option for pets (climate control and capacity).
- If possible, transport birds in smaller carriers rather than their large cages (safer for bird and takes up less space in transport vehicle)
- Use one identifier (tag, number) per animal and carry that identifier throughout the evacuation and reunification process to avoid confusion.
- Local vet and pet shop data can be helpful in understanding the needs of the population of animals in the community.
- Reptiles and birds have been identified in the situations examined for this report, as subsets of animals that require specialized expertise. It is difficult to estimate the number and type of reptiles and birds that might be in homes and to date, there have always been more than expected. Arranging access to expertise should be a priority.

Conclusion

One of the most important learnings from this project is that pre-existing relationships were the biggest determining factor in whether an organization became involved in the emergency response. As a result, organizations with expertise in emergency care and management may have not have participated at all or to their full capacity because there isn't a full understanding of expertise among planners and responders. There may be future opportunities to facilitate networking between organizations so that they can work together more effectively and to bring some consistency to response efforts.

Within Alberta, the following have been noted:

- The public has indicated, through volunteerism, donations and conduct, that pet outcomes are an important component to emergency response
- Good Samaritans will take significant risks to respond to the needs of animals during emergency situations, creating safety concerns and contributing to overall chaos.

- An animal response that is not integrated into the overall response can present safety and liability concerns for the jurisdiction concerned.
- Animal outcomes are an important component to emergency response and perceptions about the success of the response.
- Municipalities see a significant role for themselves in ensuring the safety of animals during the state of emergency in their jurisdictions.
- The challenges related to effective communication, role clarity and ensuring access to appropriate resources were experienced by all of the individuals who were involved in pet evacuation and interviewed for this project.
- In all three of these emergencies, there were relatively few injured or sick animals evacuated. In an emergency involving injured animals the complexity of the situation would be compounded and would require additional expertise.

Appendix 1. Relevant Legislation

Emergency Management Act

The *Emergency Management Act* gives broad powers to a municipality under a state of local emergency and to the provincial government under a state of provincial emergency to respond to the needs of the community. Under the Act an emergency is defined as “an event that requires prompt coordination of action or special regulation of persons or property to protect the safety, health or welfare of people or to limit damage to property”⁹. The official state of emergency specifies a particular geographical region and time frame.

In the three situations discussed here, the authority to enter homes and remove pets for evacuation is derived from the Emergency Management Act. The geographical area included in the state of emergency has a bearing on the powers of authority inside and outside the state of emergency.

Animal Protection Act

In Alberta the *Animal Protection Act* enables animal protection officers to assist animals in distress, lacking care or that are abandoned, as described within the Act. Animal protection officers have the authority to seize distressed animals or those that are abandoned (regardless of distress). The animal protection officer may transport and direct the care of the animals they are responsible for. The animal protection officer’s appointment will specify whether their jurisdiction is province wide or limited to a specific area. The authority to direct the care and control of pets during an emergency evacuation should be clarified if the animals are moved out of the emergency zone.

Veterinary Profession Act

The *Veterinary Profession Act* and its regulations govern the practice of veterinary medicine in the province of Alberta. Under the Act, the Alberta Veterinary Medical Association (ABVMA) carries out regulatory oversight and governing functions, ensuring that all veterinarians in the province hold the appropriate educational credentials and that their practices meet professional standards. As such, ABVMA plays an important role in the oversight of temporary veterinary facilities and the practice standards of their membership.

Public Health Act

The Public Health Act and Regulations outline standards to ensure the health and safety of individuals in evacuation reception centers and volunteers caring for animals. When establishing

⁹ Government of Alberta. (Revised 2000). Emergency Management Act. Accessed at: <http://www.qp.alberta.ca/documents/Acts/E06P8.pdf>

an animal reception center and/or in concert with human sheltering, proper sanitation and food handling procedures must be followed.

Appendix 2. Methodology

From July to September 2016, 14 interviews were conducted with stakeholders involved in the evacuation and care of companion animals during the Fort McMurray Wildfire (2016), the High River Flood (2013) and the Slave Lake Wildfire (2011). The following individuals and agencies were interviewed and included management, staff, peace officers and volunteers:

Alberta Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals
Alberta Veterinary Medical Association
Municipalities of Fort McMurray, Slave Lake and High River
Calgary Humane Society
Edmonton Humane Societies
Fort McMurray SPCA
Alberta Animal Rescue Crew Society (AARCS)
Alberta Spay and Neuter Taskforce
Stephanie McDonald
Animal Rescue Committee of Slave Lake (ARC)

The participants were asked the following questions:

- When were you first contacted?
- Who contacted you?
- What information were you provided when first contacted?
- How did you understand your role?
- Who was “in-charge”?
- How did you mobilize staff/volunteers?
 - What role did volunteers play in your organization’s response?
- What resources were you given?
- What challenges did you encounter?
- How was your organization impacted as a result of its participation?
- What role did the provincial government play during the response?
- If a similar situation were to occur again, what should the response look like?
 - What role should your organization play in the future?
 - What role should the Government of Alberta play in the response to these types of events?
- Were you operating under a state of emergency? (if applicable)
 - How did the state of emergency impact your organization’s response?

Notes from these interviews were then analysed using NVivo, qualitative analysis software, to identify overarching themes, issues, challenges and best practices discussed by those interviewed. Additionally, permission was given to include notes from a debriefing session hosted by the Alberta SPCA regarding the People and Animal Reunification Centre (PARC) facility in Edmonton.