

Louisiana's Response to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita

The Louisiana's role in animal disaster preparedness & response began in 2002 when the Louisiana Veterinary Medical Association Board of Directors agreed to create the State Animal Response Team (SART) and make it part of the State's Emergency Support Function (ESF) #11 (Agriculture). The lead agency for ESF #11 (Agriculture) is the Louisiana Department of Agriculture & Forestry (LDAF). The primary task for LVMA-SART at that time was to set up pre-storm evacuation shelters in the northern part of the state in order to provide a place for people to take their (small animal) pets when they evacuate. These shelters would open in conjunction with Red Cross human shelters as assigned by the (human) Shelter Task Force. *Evacuees would be responsible for taking care of their own animals.* Large animals were considered in the response plan, but planning for their protection was in a more general, owner-owned manner. In response to Hurricanes Ivan and Dennis (and others), evacuation shelters were set up in Alexandria, Monroe & Shreveport. After Dennis (2005), the LVMA- SART was tasked with planning shelters in Lafayette & Baton Rouge.

Our involvement in Hurricane Katrina began with opening the pre-storm evacuation shelters in Monroe, Shreveport, & Alexandria. These shelters were managed by LVMA District Representative Dr. James Rundell (Monroe), LVMA District Representative Dr. Gary Dupree, LVMA member, Dr. Susan Bradley (Shreveport), and LVMA District Representative Dr. David McGraw (Alexandria). Other preparations were begun around the state. The LaSPCA (the animal control agency for Orleans Parish), in response to the threat posed by Katrina, evacuated their shelter animals to Houston. Dr. Martha Littlefield, Assistant State Veterinarian (ASV) with the LDAF (Bob Odom, Commissioner) pre-positioned VMAT & national humane groups in out of state locations (but on call) to assist with rescue shelters. *Evacuation* shelters were shelters where owners could take and care for their animals. *Rescue* shelters were shelters set up to recover and receive animals after the storm. These animals were to have no owners with them. They were to be housed in the rescue shelter until their owners could reclaim them or until an animal could be sent to a longer-term facility.

Katrina slammed ashore devastating the state. The first responders were the local veterinarians who responded with great care and much responsibility. There are too many to list, but they were essential to this relief effort. The ability to be self sufficient for at least 3 days needs to be considered and understood. The calvary, whether state or federal, takes time to mobilize. In a statewide disaster or emergency, according to ESF #11, the State Veterinarian (Dr. Mack Lea) & the USDA APHIS Veterinary Services Area Veterinarian-in-Charge (AVIC) (Dr. Joel Goldman) are responsible for all animals in disaster. They were the area co-commanders for the Incident Command (IC) for both the Katrina and Rita disasters using the mandatory incident command system (ICS) structure. For those unfamiliar with ICS, you are encouraged to go on line and learn about how all emergencies are now mandated to be handled. Many people don't realize that while rescue is important and feels good, there are other aspects that happened during a disaster and need to be done. Central command leadership including coordination with State, Federal and Volunteer groups is important.

Red Cross opened human shelters in Baton Rouge & Lafayette. The LVMA opened animal shelters in Baton Rouge & Lafayette. LVMA member Dr. Paula Drone was in charge of the Baton Rouge Shelter located at the Parker Coliseum on the LSU campus. Dr. David Orgeron (LVMA District Representative) was in charge of the Lafayette shelter at Blackham Coliseum. Dr. Sonya Brouillette also set up a shelter in St. Helena Parish. They were LVMA evacuation

shelters where the second wave of human evacuees could bring their pets with them.

The LVMA SART Director Dr. Renee Poirrier was called to Baton Rouge to assist with the establishment of a rescue shelter in Gonzales at the Lamar Dixon Equine Center. In Louisiana's state plan for animal response in disasters, local animal control officers are responsible for small animal rescue until their resources cannot be met. La-SPCA is a humane organization contracted to provide animal control services for Orleans Parish and, by agreement with adjoining parishes provide the local animal control officers who are responsible for small animal rescues in parishes around the Orleans area. State resources originally aimed at helping the local animal control officers carry out their mission. However, when their facility was destroyed, they were unable to take calls from citizens. Phone banks were set up at LDAF Office of Health Services and Baton Rouge's Cajun Clicker Computer Group helped manage the tremendous amount of data collected.

Dr. Littlefield contacted Dr. Rebecca Adcock (LVMA District Representative) to establish a central hotline to take calls. Dr. Adcock also set up and updated the LSU website, the official website for animal relief efforts. Large animal, especially equine calls began coming in and Dr. Adcock asked Dr. Becky McConnico and Dr. Rusty Moore to field these calls & the Equine Hotline was born. Technically, animal control officers are responsible for horses in their areas; however, they were overwhelmed with the small animal response.

Arrangements were made to have monetary donations sent to the Walter J. Ernst Foundation (the foundation associated with the LVMA) and supply donations sent to LDAF with Commissioner Odom's approval and support.

State Veterinarian Dr. Mack Lea and LVMA-SART Director Dr. Renee Poirrier devised a large animal response group consisting of USDA veterinarians & LVMA equine veterinarians. Dr. Shannon Gonsoulin (LVMA member at large) & Dr. Sonny Corley (LVMA member) were tasked with organizing 5 LVMA equine veterinarians per day for 2 weeks to extract horses from the affected areas. In less than 36 hours, a list was compiled to cover a period of 4 weeks. The first 67 horses extracted were by Dr. Fred Bourgeois, LVMA member and Federal veterinarian, his team of Animal Health Technicians and other State and Federal Veterinarians. As the number of horse calls increased, Dr. McConnico & Dr. Rustin Moore mapped out the location of the calls. LVMA equine vets went to each location, removed the horses, and with the help of Dominic's Stockyard trailers, as well as volunteers with trailers, took the horses to Lamar Dixon. Bonnie Clark, president of the Louisiana Equine Council, was tasked by Dr. Littlefield to run the equine shelter at Lamar Dixon. Dr. Denny French, LVMA member, and his LSU students provided veterinary care for the horses. Flooding and the storm surge removed many of the livestock to the Gulf of Mexico. Large animal disposal was coordinated by the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Services (NRCS).

LaSPCA had pre-storm agreements with the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) to partner and manage the Lamar Dixon small animal shelter. Other national humane groups were tasked to help relieve various shelters around the state. The SART Director Dr. Poirrier and Dr. Littlefield chose American Humane Association (AHA) for Lafayette, and the Emergency Animal Response Services/United Animal Nations (EARS/UAN) for Monroe. Shreveport & Baton Rouge did not need outside help at that time. Prior to the storm, Slidell Animal Control had contracted and practiced emergency response exercises with Noah's Wish.

VMAT commander Dr. Kellogg arrived to accept responsibility for surveying areas of the state for damage and to report back to the IC. Intake at Lamar Dixon was handled by VMAT Veterinarians. They were tasked to staff Lamar Dixon 24 hours per day, 7 days per week. Every

animal extracted from the Orleans area was to be decontaminated and triaged on entry. If any needed intense medical care, they were to be sent to LSU SVM. As more and more animals were rescued, the daily area command meetings at the LDAF building centered on the need to export animals out of the state because it was determined that there were not enough resources in the State to care for the extracted animals. A subcommittee, headed by the executive director of humane shelter managers, decided to ship small animals to approved brick and mortar shelters across the country. The LVMA-SART director participated in the meeting and helped devise export protocols for animals leaving the state. Each animal shipped out of the Lamar Dixon Shelter was to be microchipped, vaccinated, dewormed and treated for external parasites by United States Public Health Service (USPHS) Veterinarians, VMAT or US Army 248th Medical Detachment Veterinarians.

There was no need to ship horses out of state, because of the diligence of Bonnie Clark and the fact that each horse was permanently identified with a microchip, brand or tattoo and ownership verified. Equine shelter protocols were determined by Dr. French. Each horse was vaccinated, triaged, and tested for EIA. One success has been that microchipping interest has picked up nationwide because of the success with Bonnie's equine program and the microchipping of the small animals. Statistics on the large animal rescue included 382 animals, 264 horses, 3 pigs and 15 goats. Lamar Dixon handled a daily average of 157 horses. Five horses were evacuated to Lamar Dixon, but veterinarians and other rescuers recovered 359 animals. Lamar Dixon was used as a large animal handling facility for 56 days.

Dr. Bill Stokes, the USPHS veterinarian in charge of Lamar Dixon at the time, asked that the LVMA provide as many veterinarians as possible for a weekend to check New Orleans addresses for animals left behind. The SART director contacted the LVMA District Representatives and in three days, 30 LVMA veterinarians agreed to meet in New Orleans to make a push to check as many addresses as possible.

While the media focused on the dogs and cats, many other types of animals (and cell lines) were rescued by state and federal veterinarians and animal health technicians. Retrieval and transport of these animals and cells during the initial days post-hurricane were dangerous, hot and long and the efforts of these people were overlooked.

Just as intake from New Orleans decreased and export at Lamar Dixon was gearing up, Hurricane Rita appeared in the gulf. As Rita neared shore, preparations were begun again.

Animal control officers from Lake Charles evacuated their facility in order to convert it to a rescue shelter for small animals. The Sugarena was designated as a large animal shelter by Dr. Gonsoulin. Lamar Dixon and Parker Coliseum were made as secure as possible. The human shelter at the Cajun Dome in Lafayette was evacuated to Shreveport and the animals in the LVMA Blackham Coliseum Shelter, following their owners, were evacuated to Shreveport as well.

Rita slammed ashore devastating Louisiana. Lake Charles Animal Control was paired with the American Humane Association. Since flooding in Lake Charles was minimal and quickly receded, animals were not extracted from homes but fed in-place. Two weeks went by before any healthy animals were picked up in Lake Charles, giving owners time to return and take care of their pets. Injured or ill pets were picked up and triaged and sent to local veterinary hospitals. Severely affected animals were sent to LSU SVM.

The equine hotline was once again set up to take calls. Most of the horses, cattle, sheep, goats and pigs at Sugarena were transported there by their owners.

An estimated 20,000 cattle were lost from Hurricane Rita (total loss was 35-40,000 head).

After the storm, there was a race against time to remove as many cattle by horseback as possible out of the area and off of the salt water contaminated pastures. USDA AHPIS personnel working with LDAF and the Louisiana National Guard dropped feed and water to stranded animals and assisted with the round up (food and water drops were made to animals on levees during Katrina). The LVMA-SART provided vaccine to local veterinarian Dr. Clyde Prejean who vaccinated and treated the cattle. Other large animal veterinarians in the area were a tremendous help in this endeavor. The Cattleman's Association and LSU AgCenter personnel coordinated food and hay deliveries. Others participated also.

Small animal evacuation shelters were again set up in Abbeville, Lafayette, Baton Rouge, Shreveport, and Monroe.

Some of our Lessons Learned

We have emphasized to veterinarians the following things: "The most important thing anyone can do to help in times of disaster is have a personal disaster plan in place to take care of your family. The next step is to have disaster plan for your business. Make sure your business interruption insurance covers you until your business reopens. Make sure you have up to date replacement value on your equipment. What will happen to the animals in your care if a disaster strikes your area? Last but by no means least, join the State Animal Response Team!"

The LVMA was an integral part of the Katrina/Rita animal relief effort, but one must not focus on just one group. The foresight of the LVMA Board of Directors to agree to form the LVMA- State Animal Response Team was a tremendous asset. The cooperation of the major humane groups, especially in pre-staging and coordinating with Dr. Littlefield, was a learning experience for the groups. Learning to play together in the same sandbox was major step toward a coordinated animal rescue and evacuation shelter response. Computer systems could have come in earlier; records could have been kept better. The volunteers needed to be better controlled and managed. Credentialing all the players would have helped. Tighter perimeter fencing and security would have helped control many aspects of the rescue including the "shoppers". Working more closely with State Police and Parish Sheriffs would have cleaned up some of the rogue "just-got-to-rescue" groups. Exit strategies for these groups should have been set up at the beginning of the incident. Ownership issues during disasters need to be legislatively set. Donations need to be better managed. In short, everything could have been done better, but we did the best we could.

The LVMA's pre-storm evacuation shelters are a model for other states preparing their disaster plans. The challenge becomes to build on this foundation. To do this the La-SART will need more volunteers. We have asked for a bank of interested veterinarians, veterinary technicians & lay people to train for and be prepared to respond to the needs of animals & their people in disasters – any type of disaster. Incident Command System 100 and 200 training would be the minimum level for the volunteers credentialed, while the upper level command would need additional ICS training. Louisiana is moving from a state that prepares for animals in hurricanes to a state that has an "all animals—all disasters plan". Following after action meetings with the LDAF & USDA APHIS Veterinary Services, the LVMA-SART has decided that each LVMA district should have a large & small animal veterinarian responsible for coordinating relief efforts for animals in their district as well as veterinarians & veterinary technicians from across the state who would be willing to respond to disasters in any part of the state. We have emphasized that training can be done on line but we have plans are in the works for state training meetings. The Board of Veterinary Medicine has been made aware that veterinarians need

continuing education credits for courses taken in the preparation for emergencies, and we continue to stress the need for CE credits and recognition for this important segment of veterinary medicine. Cross state line cooperation between the licensing boards will be essential to keep the animals within the proper state. Pre-staging storage containers with items that can be used quickly to set up a shelter are being pre-positioned in regions around the state.

It is hoped that veterinarians remember to make plans ahead of time for their family and clinic. Animals can be moved, equipment can be replaced, but during the time of a disaster, having a plan and being calm, self sufficient and willing to help makes the disaster, if it could be, a little better.