

## June is Disaster Preparedness Month

**In honor of Disaster Preparedness Month, get 10 tips you and your pet should take before disaster strikes.**

*By Jeanne Marie Erwin*

According to the Federal Emergency Management Agency, there were 52 natural disasters in 2006, which does not include non-natural disasters, such as fires in the home. Disasters can happen anywhere at any time.

Because disasters are unplanned, you won't have time to get organized when one occurs. According to Tiffany Mahaffey, disaster preparedness manager for the ASPCA, the most common mistakes people make during a disaster are not planning ahead for pet evacuation and "[not evacuating] when the order first comes out."

Here are 10 steps to help you plan ahead for the safety of your pets, so you can leave quickly and early in the event of a disaster:

1

Create a disaster preparedness kit with everything your cat needs to survive in case you are without assistance for up to 72 hours. Have the kit readily accessible and near an exit. In order to evacuate quickly, Mahaffey says to, "Have your pet evacuation kit ready to go." It should be light and convenient so that you can grab it easily as you are leaving. If your pets require carriers, keep the carriers and the kit together.

2

Research shelters and hotels near you that will accept pets during an emergency. Make sure you know how to get there and keep the contact information with you or in your disaster preparedness kit. Remember: Red Cross Disaster Shelters do not allow animals for health and safety reasons. Identify your evacuation shelter now — during a disaster is no time to be searching for a place to go. You may also want to consider evacuating to a friend or relative's house, as well.

3

Have a picture taken of you and your cat. This will help you to verify ownership of the animal in case you get separated during the disaster. You also want to be able to tell rescuers of any identifying marks on your pets. This greatly aids in the reunification process.

4

Obtain and display an ASPCA “Pets Inside” sticker. This will notify emergency crews that there are animals inside that may need help. Put the number and types of animals you have on the sticker. If you are able to evacuate with your animal, write “EVACUATED” on the sticker, if time permits.<sup>5</sup> Find an emergency contact in your area who will look after your cat if you are away or at work when the disaster occurs. This person should be trustworthy, as he or she will need to have a key to get into your house. This person also should know the location of your disaster preparedness kit.<sup>6</sup>

Know your cats’ favorite hiding places inside and outside the house. Bring them in at the first warning of a disaster. Because animals may become scared or disoriented during a disaster, knowing where they hide when they are afraid can save you valuable time during a crisis. Make sure your emergency contact person has this information, as well. Keep your cats with you or in a safe room during a disaster, so that you can find them if you need to evacuate.<sup>7</sup>

Make sure all pets have collars with I.D. tags and that the information is current. Animals often get separated during a disaster and proper identification may help reunite you with your pet. Microchipping is also advised, since collars may get lost.<sup>8</sup>

Be aware of the natural disasters that commonly occur in your area. Contact local organizations to find out how you need to prepare for specific disasters.

For example, you may need to keep a larger store of food if it is likely that you might face severe snowstorms and be snowed in for long periods, or you may want to purchase animal life vests if your area is prone to hurricanes and flooding. This might also dictate how far you have to go to evacuate. According to Mahaffey, most county emergency management agencies will have that information.<sup>9</sup> Familiarize your cat with its carrier. “Many cats only see their carrier when they are taken to the vet or the groomers, so they associate it with an unpleasant situation, causing them additional stress during a disaster. Taking your cat out in a carrier for fun trips or feeding your cat in the carrier can help to lessen the stress for both you and your cat during a disaster. You don’t want to struggle to get your cat in the carrier,” Mahaffey says.<sup>10</sup>

Most importantly: Take your animals with you. Not only does separation from their owners create anxiety in animals already under stress, but also their chance of survival decreases when left to fend for themselves. You are your cat’s best hope for safely making it through a disaster.