

Preparing Animals for Disaster

Pet owners prepare to keep their animals safe in case disaster strikes.

September 20, 2005 With scientists and researchers primarily focusing on protecting humans and the food supply against terrorist attacks, emergency responders should be aware that animals in the community need to be cared for during disasters, whether these disasters are natural or man-made. One University of Missouri-Columbia researcher is working to help keep research administrators and pet owners prepared to keep their animals safe in case disaster strikes.

Human health and safety is the priority during disasters, but plans can help make sure that animals are properly cared for when problems happen, says Cathy Vogelweid, MU associate professor of veterinary pathobiology in the College of Veterinary Medicine. Everyone needs to lose the mindset that, this could never happen to me. Advance preparation can avoid a lot of problems and heartbreak in the event of an emergency.

Vogelweid is working to improve animal facility designs for research that will help universities build secure buildings, but also keep the best interests of the animals in mind. Vogelweid warns that research administrators should identify what critical resources would be needed in a disaster and how to get them. Administrators also should be realistic about animal space needs and be aware of how difficult it may be to evacuate animals during an emergency. Some of the same preparations that researchers use might also be helpful for pet owners.

In tragedies around the country, people have put themselves in harms way to save their pets. Emergency responders need to be aware of the effect on people when pets are involved in a disaster, Vogelweid says. While emergency responders need to work pets and animals into their plan, pet owners can do a lot to be prepared in the event of a major problem.

Vogelweid offers the following recommendations for pet owners. Pet owners should: Plan in advance to take their pets with them if they are ordered to evacuate. Pet owners should identify places where pets are accepted in their area before a disaster strikes (pet-friendly hotels, animal shelters, fairgrounds, etc.). In most cases, Red Cross shelters will not accept pets for housing.