

Hazardous Weather Responses: The Animals

Session Summary

John Walther. Asst Commissioner, Louisiana Office of Animal Health and Food Safety

Walther thought the state was prepared to respond to hazardous weather before Katrina occurred. During Katrina the people least inclined to evacuate their homes were pet owners. Consequently, the state acquired specially designed vehicles to transport pets and set up separate medi-pet shelters located near human shelters so owners could tend to their pets during visitation hours. Animal welfare organizations were helpful in the planning and implementation of this dual evacuation system.

The state invested homeland security grants in two areas – training and planning – by professional facilitators using the principles of the national Incident Command System. Five hundred employees were trained. The focus of planning was not limited to severe weather but also applied to crop protection and food supply as well as programs to protect employees from biological threats such as anthrax. At the local level, regional centers partnered with extensions.

Unfortunately, federal programs do not address agricultural animal rescue although there is some assistance for humanitarian cases. But, coalitions have been formed with local agriculture centers, cattlemen's associations, etc. to raise money for hazardous weather response. County agents are refining incident assessments. Fuel distribution is an important component of the local response.

Deborah Johnson, Executive Director, North Carolina Pork Council

North Carolina has a highly integrated agricultural system in which most growers are also contractors. They are therefore highly reluctant to evacuate an emergency. Hazardous weather conditions create issues not just for livestock feeding and care operations. Ground saturation, wind damage and power outages create hazards for their transportation to and from processing plants, creates the necessity of temporary housing, and affects the movement of livestock through processing facilities. In addition, hazardous weather impacts farm labor, damages buildings and equipment and necessitates debris renewal. It disrupts breeding schedules and incurs debt payment penalties for growers and others.

In response to the animal agriculture issues incurred during hurricane Floyd the state established an interagency state organization SART – State Animal & Agriculture Response Teams – in which the state agriculture department is a full-fledged partner in the state's response to hazardous weather emergencies.. SART's emphasis is on food supply and food security and safety. The program streamlines resources and, by cutting red tape in advance, expedites the process through which farmers obtain emergency assistance. The state is also providing generator assistance including the huge generators required for food mills.

The state is implementing a number of measures to aid producers during hazardous weather incidents:

- expediting permits and allocating NRCS funds for carcass burial or other disposal that includes transportation to incineration facilities
- coordinating hay exchanges
- enhancing IT capabilities that include inventories of what services are already available and keeping databases current
- establishing connections between commodities and government

- designing compensation programs that consider the implications of tax liability as well as indemnity.

The legislature passed Senate Bill 377 in 2013 to temporarily suspend routine weight inspections of trucks due to the threat of loss of livestock or poultry or severe damage to crops ready to be harvested.

Johnson noted some more recent concerns in the era of mobile devices and animal activist groups. Many of the images caught by mobile devices and digital cameras present negative connotations for ag producers. Animal activist groups have shifted from the environmental concerns posed by animal carcass disposal in the nineties to that of stranded animals in recent weather-caused incidents. State agencies need to counter these presentations with more positive images.

The big picture and the human element needs to be provided by ranchers that are managing livestock survival. Many ranchers are reluctant to attract direct PR but they might help attract support for positive animal agriculture practices during weather hazards. Agriculture departments need to publish press releases before weather incidents outlining what farmers are doing to prepare for them.

Q: The worst issue in the South Dakota 2013 blizzard was getting drowned cattle carcasses out of waterways. They were not considered debris and the owners could not be identified.
A: In a federal disaster declaration National Guard and NRCS contractors can be used for this purpose. Carcasses can be determined to be a water quality or environmental threat, designated as class one solid waste or declared a public health risk if they float downstream.