

EMERGENCY! Creating a care plan for pets, livestock during a natural disaster

Written by By Holly J. Wagner Sun Correspondent
Friday, 24 June 2022 05:18



It's in the nature of emergencies that they're unexpected and generally demand a response when there's no time to think. Who do you call? Where do you go? What happens to your pets or livestock if you're displaced?

Authorities in Gallup and McKinley County want to have answers for as many of those questions as possible before an emergency arises. Now, those answers include pets and livestock as well as people.

Counties are required to have emergency operations plans so they don't have to figure out how to handle emergencies on the fly. That plan is broken into smaller components, including a Joint Shelter and Mass Care plan. It's an agreement to respond and coordinate across jurisdictional boundaries in case of an emergency or disaster.

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“It just allows us to play well in the sandbox, so to speak,” Gallup Fire Chief Jesus “Chuy” Morales said.

One need only look at the headlines to see how entire lives can change in a minute: A mass shooter event like the one in Uvalde, Texas. A flood like the one that just in the last week forced closure of Yellowstone Park after washing away roads and at least one bridge. A wildfire like the Marshall Fire that swept through Superior, Colo., over the holidays and forced evacuation of 30,000 people – and their animals.

Until now, McKinley County’s plan didn’t include what to do about animals in an evacuation event. That’s more than a detail in a county with an estimated 15,000-plus pet-owning households, along with thousands of horses, hundreds of cows and calves and other livestock on ranches, and a variety of wildlife.

“It’s becoming a more and more important piece of sheltering in evacuations,” McKinley County Fire Manager Adam Berry said.

Morales cited as an example the Calf Canyon Fire that has already burned 345,000 acres in northern New Mexico and is still only 85% contained.

“With the wildfires up north, a lot of evacuations occurred [and] those residents and communities [have] lots of large animals and pets,” he explained. “Having facilities that are pre-designated that can accommodate that type of evacuation, such as Red Rock Park, is important for our community in the event of a large fire. The potential is there.”

Fires aren’t the only worry. The plan assesses threats as high, medium and low probability and frequency. Infrastructure interruptions, wildland and urban interface fires, drought, severe weather and flash floods are all high threats in McKinley County. Public health emergencies, hazardous material spills and active shooters are on the medium threat tier. Terrorism and geological activity are comparatively low risks here. But every day the news provides reminders of the importance of advance planning.

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“We as a country learned a lot when the levees broke in New Orleans and they had to house all these people. There was no rhyme or reason to anything they were doing. Buses got stuck up on a bridge. The water was coming in. You had people inside a stadium that didn’t have enough food, enough heat,” Dist. 4 Councilor Fran Palochak, who has sat on emergency preparedness committees, said. “Being on a main interstate [highway] and having the railroad, if a car with hazardous materials overturned, we’d have to evacuate this city. It’s really crucial that we have all these plans in place and don’t try to figure it out when the emergencies happen.”

Mayor Louie Bonaguidi compared the plan to an insurance policy. “We go through the process of ‘in case,’ and hope this disaster never happens,” he said. “It’s kind of like insurance. We buy insurance hoping we never have to use it.”

The new JSMC is part of the county’s longstanding emergency operations plan, which is periodically updated. It was updated in 2016 and 2018, and items were added when COVID-19 swept the country to include the threat of a pandemic, Berry said.

“Ideally we get it reviewed once a year. Every two years it has to be reviewed and updates completed,” he said. The larger emergency management plan, which he describes as “a toolbox or playbook,” includes annex modules, like the JSMC, to address specific issues.

“If we wrote a super specific plan for everything that could happen, it’s not going to work when the next one happens because there are so many variables in emergencies,” he said. “This puts all the pieces of the puzzle together to accomplish the task at hand when an emergency happens.”

The county offers an emergency alert program called Code Red that will automatically contact local landlines, but people must sign up to receive alerts via cell phone or text.

“The other day Gallup had a power outage and dispatch sent out an alert on Code Red,” Berry said. “We encourage people to sign up for cell phone or something they have with them the majority of the time.”

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Even though the city and county have emergency management plans, it's a good idea for individuals to have their own plans for contacting family and friends in an emergency.

McKinley County residents can find information on how to create emergency plans for their homes and businesses, and a link to sign up for Code Red emergency cell phone alerts, at <http://mcoem.com> .

Plan for your pets!

A Pet Emergency Kit should have the following items:

Three to seven days' worth of food

Bottled water

Medications (two weeks supply)

Copy of pet's medical records and vaccinations (in waterproof container)

Food and water dishes

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Extra leash and harness

Pet carrier or kennel

Kitty litter and tray

Extra toys/blankets

If you become separated from your pets

In many instances people are forced to evacuate without their pets. Getting reunited with your animals during a disaster situation can be complicated, and the task is much easier if you take steps in advance, such as:

Have your pets licensed with your local municipality so details of your animals are established and on the record.

Have up-to-date ID for your animals including a tattoo or microchip and an ID tag with the animal's name, urgent medical needs and your phone number.

Keep recent photos of your pets with you.

– **Tiffany Hubbard, Gallup Animal Protection Manager**