

UC Davis Volunteers Hone Disaster Response Skills

Imagine three scenes: 50 dairy cattle are stranded at a flooded farm more than 24 hours after humans have been evacuated. Two dogs—one is injured—have been spotted on a levee inside a roadblock. A horse standing in three feet of water is entangled in barbed wire.

These flood disaster “scenarios” were presented at an emergency briefing of 45 UC Davis Veterinary Medical Assistance Team (UCD-VMAT) members called by the Governor’s Office of Emergency Services (OES) to take part in preparedness exercises on a cold, foggy Saturday morning last January.

Professor John Madigan served as incident commander this day as he and Yolo County OES Emergency Services Coordinator Dan McCanta briefed the assembled veterinary medical, animal handling and transport, communications and animal rescue experts.

The exercise was a joint effort by the all-volunteer UCD-VMAT (students, faculty, staff and community members); Yolo County OES, Sheriff’s Department and Animal Control; CVMA disaster coordinator Bruce Dennie; the California Department of Food and Agriculture; and the American Red Cross. Their aim is to provide assistance to animals in trouble during a disaster, when it is safe for rescuers to enter the affected area.

UCD-VMAT Teams Respond

The volunteers formed a team for each scenario and divided their equipment and expertise—each team included a large or small animal veterinarian and communications operator, for instance—and were prepared not only to simulate rescue operations, but also to evaluate the medical condition of animals detailed in the scenarios and to administer necessary treatments.

En route to the disaster site, made available for the exercise by a Yolo county rancher, all vehicles were stopped at a roadblock. Sheriff’s Department officers checked individuals for proper OES identification cards without which, in a real emergency, they would not be allowed inside the roadblock to aid stranded animals.

Once on-site, the teams were deployed to dairy cattle, dogs and horses who willingly served as rescues. Team members walked through the situation,



Professor Peter Pascoe (left) is the group’s veterinarian as the UCD-VMAT sets out in search of dogs stranded on a levee during a simulated flood disaster. They carry all the equipment and medical supplies they may need to handle the rescue and provide veterinary care for the canine flood victims.

worked out various problems associated with their rescue and noted key equipment and techniques that could improve their response in a genuine emergency.

They thanked the rancher and prepared to return to the Veterinary Medical Teaching Hospital for a pizza lunch provided by the Red Cross.

As a challenge to the participants, Extension Veterinarian Emeritus Ben Norman managed to hide some gear that was not later missed by its team—oops. But, the team member he hid as a test that “no one be left behind” was reported missing and was located before departure.



After being located on a levee, the dog is rescued, treated for injuries and given an identification collar. During the simulated disaster, team members share their expertise in solving potential problems.

“The Dog Was Way Too Friendly!”

At the debriefing, Peter Pascoe, veterinarian for the dog rescue team, commented, “The [rancher’s] dog was way too friendly!” He pointed out that in a real situation, especially with an injured dog, the animal would likely be elusive and possibly aggressive.

Another, sometimes difficult, lesson is that safety to humans must come first. To be effective in assisting animals during disasters, rescue workers must never become victims in need of rescue themselves. The levee scenario indicated that before the second dog could be coaxed in and caught, VMAT members “were alerted that a levee had broken and they must evacuate immediately,” leaving the dog behind to fend for itself.

Answering a reporter’s question, third-year veterinary student Jacqui Whitemore summed up the general spirit “Why are we all out here? Because everyone involved thinks it’s the right thing to do!” As a result, the people and animals they are prepared to serve are more likely to come safely through the next disaster.

Future UCD-VMAT plans include conducting regular exercises—such as a wildfire drill June 5—and developing a World Wide Web-based “lost and found” for locating displaced animals.

A free guide to disaster preparedness is available online: (www.vetmed.ucdavis.edu/vetext/INF-DI_DANRGuide.html).