

**U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management**

“Animals in Disasters”

Testimony of

Wesley Bissett, DVM, PhD

Director, Texas A&M Veterinary Emergency Team

Texas A&M College of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences

Chairwoman Titus, Ranking Member Meadows, Vice Chairwoman Fletcher, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify regarding the impact of disasters on animals and their owners. All too often, the impact of disasters on animals and owners are seen as separate issues, but as you will hear from my testimony, they are one in the same and must be looked at in that matter. My name is Dr. Wesley Bissett and I am the Director of the Texas A&M Veterinary Emergency Team (VET) at the Texas A&M College of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences.

The Texas A&M VET was formed at the request of the Texas Division of Emergency Management in 2010 to provide the State of Texas with a robust and deployable veterinary medical capability. The Texas A&M VET has deployed to all major disasters and numerous smaller-scale incidents that have occurred in our state since that time. The Texas A&M VET has been a key contributor to the state response effort on behalf of resident animals across a wide array of incident types including wildfires, explosions, hurricanes, floods, and the 2014 Dallas, Texas Ebola virus incident. We have also been active through our integration with Texas Task Force 1, one of the 28 FEMA Urban Search and Rescue Teams, through our provision of veterinary medical support to canine assets attached to the team. The Texas A&M VET has in addition developed subject matter expertise in the area of emergency preparedness and are key members in our state’s animal focused emergency planning efforts down to the local level.

Animal Issues

“All hazards emergency plans” is a common mantra in the emergency management discipline. I would argue that the mantra needs to be “all hazards and all species” as animals are impacted in virtually all disaster scenarios. The State of Texas has had ample opportunity to learn this lesson given the many disasters that have occurred in our state, with one of the most recent being Hurricane Harvey in 2017. Human health, well-being, and safety is always the highest priority in emergency and disaster situations and I am not here to testify that animals should be given equal priority. The reality is however, that people will factor in their animals when deciding how to respond to a threat and many will make decisions that are not in their own best interest if their animals are not provided for. An example is provided by an elderly woman who refused to evacuate from Bolivar Peninsula in Texas prior to Hurricane Ike in 2008. She had recently had a knee replacement and would not leave her home prior to landfall due to her inability to carry her

elderly dog down a flight of stairs. She did not realize help was available and was unfortunately identified by the serial number on her knee replacement hardware which was found approximately 6 miles and across the bay from her home. A more current example is provided by the 2019 novel *Coronavirus* incident unfolding before us. I am aware of a person who refused evacuation from Wuhan, China because their animal could not be evacuated with them.

I, as a veterinarian, believe that animals are inherently worthy of an effective disaster response. As the Director of the Texas A&M VET, I, along with our team members have experienced just how important animals are to the human victims of a disaster. The reality of a human disaster victim is that it is someone who may have lost a home, a loved one, or a friend. They may be facing a tremendous sense of financial insecurity due to destruction of their place of employment, a bleak outlook for income generation, and the high costs of recovery. The reality is that our pets, our animals, our livestock are an important source of comfort and yes, security. These lessons have come through the many times that we have been involved in addressing disaster-related animal injuries and illnesses on behalf of their owners and when we are involved with reuniting an owner and animal that had been separated by disaster conditions. These are powerful interactions that I believe provide one of the first opportunities for recovery of disaster victims. A common phrase that I hear during these interactions is “Doc, everything is going to be okay.” The reunion with their beloved pet or even herd of livestock is often the first time these people tell their stories and recognize that they can take a step forward to a renewed future. These situations are moments that I and other VET members will forever cherish. They illustrate that we, the Texas A&M VET, in addition to being in the business of veterinary medicine, are in the business of hope. I would argue that hope is a tremendous commodity to be brought into a community impacted by a disaster. I would further argue that the highest priority, human health, well-being, and safety, can never be fully addressed without addressing the animal condition.

This role that animals play in our lives transcends the different species of animals. Household pets, in today’s society, are often considered part of the family and the emotional bonds are strong. Emotional ties also exist for agricultural animals and while these animals are managed for profit and introduction into the human food supply, their care-givers have a tremendous emotional and psychological commitment to the health and well-being of the animals under their care. We have experienced the same expressions of hope when we have reunited ranchers and their cattle.

Agricultural animals have the additional distinction of being economically important species. The Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Economic Unit estimated Hurricane Harvey agricultural animal losses at \$93 million dollars. This is significant at the state level, but what does it mean on a finer scale? The loss of agricultural animals can most certainly be devastating to family operations. This loss is most certainly financial, but may also represent the loss of a lifetime or even generations of effort and genetic selection. An individual producer’s losses reflect the loss of years of hard work and potentially threatens the ability to recover their operation and feed their family. The cost of lost agricultural animals escalates as multiple producers are impacted, particularly in communities whose primary economic base is derived from the agricultural sector. In these communities, lost agricultural income is multiplied across all of the businesses that provide services to animal agriculture producers. This can threaten recovery at the community level and persist well after the houses are rebuilt and roads are repaired.

The need to consider and have resources capable of responding to animal issues exists throughout the disaster timeline spanning evacuation, rescue, veterinary medical care, sheltering, and reunification. These all require significant planning and development of resources, both of which may be beyond what can be provided in jurisdictions across the country. Our experience has been that many communities struggle to identify professionals with appropriate levels of animal-related and emergency management experience to develop effective animal-focused emergency plans. This is exacerbated due to the paucity of jurisdictional employees engaged in animal-related activities. Animal-related expertise employed by jurisdictions is typically limited to animal control officers, livestock officers and extension agents.

The reality is that most jurisdictions struggle to provide adequate staffing and leadership for all emergency functions required for an effective animal-focused response. Animal response, as with other areas of emergency response, necessarily extends into the non-governmental arena. The challenge is that there are no underlying standards that apply to all involved and therefore no standardized foundation from which to build an effective response. There are also differences in agendas or underlying beliefs that make a cohesive response difficult. Our experience has been that there may often be differences between Animal Control Services and local non-governmental animal shelter or rescue groups. These differences are understandable given that there are differences in the underlying missions of these types of organizations. Neither are wrong; they are just different. We have seen similar difficulties when rural-based and urban-based units operate in the same disaster theater. There are often differences in what is considered acceptable when viewed from the lens of very different experiences and also differences in thought of what should be done for household pets versus livestock. This issue is compounded by most jurisdictions having budgetary limitations on what they can invest on behalf of animals. The end result is that the local response, particularly in larger scale disasters, falls short on providing for animals and therefore incompletely serves the highest priority of human health, well-being and safety.

The role of veterinary medicine in emergency management is worthy of additional discussion. Local jurisdictions typically employ few, if any, veterinarians. This drives veterinary medical support into the private sector. The veterinary medical industry is still predominantly one driven by small businesses. It has also evolved to a point where more veterinarians are focusing on household pets rather than livestock. The Texas A&M VET experience is that most jurisdictions cannot pay for veterinary medical services provided in a disaster setting due to their not having the budgetary capacity for entering into veterinary service agreements. This is exacerbated for agricultural animal-related expenses given that they are expressly excluded from Stafford Act provisions addressing reimbursement of animal-related costs. The end result is that veterinarians are often expected to participate as volunteers with their business centers often being the epicenter of veterinary medical operations.

It is important to note that this is not just a person volunteering. Veterinarians, to be effective, must have the “tools of the trade.” To make the point, would you expect a fireman to extinguish an apartment fire with a garden hose? In the case of veterinarians, the equipment, supplies, and pharmaceuticals are expensive, yet necessary and critical. Performing emergency operations in their place of business also interferes with their ability to recover their businesses and resume the process of income generation. They are also typically not trained to be in the disaster theater. Disaster conditions are often exceedingly hazardous and emergency operations complex. These two issues make it exceedingly difficult for veterinarians to commit to being a component of

emergency operations. The 2011 Bastrop, Texas Complex Wildfire provides an excellent example. Two veterinary practices, one small animal and one mixed, participated on behalf of their county prior to the Texas A&M VET being deployed to the area. They estimated their financial losses associated with the response in the six-figure range. This was compounded by the shrinkage of their client pool after the disaster. An additional example is provided by a Large Animal veterinarian in coastal South Texas. He participated on behalf of his county during Hurricane Harvey in 2017. Recent personal conversations with this veterinarian revealed that he will not be participating in the future. Reasons expressed included significant financial investments with no reimbursement, lost ability to generate income for a period of approximately 45 days, and a lack of training for working in the hazards of the post-disaster environment.

The result of the issues described above is predictable. There are many people and organizations who are passionate about animals yet very inexperienced in emergency management. Many of these individuals and groups are willing to self-deploy into a disaster area. This creates numerous issues. They rarely have the ability to be self-sustaining in terms of re-supply of necessary supplies or providing for themselves and quickly become another problem for the jurisdiction to manage.

The lack of integration also results in the disposition of animals that are not consistent with the desires of the local government and citizens. Most local governments are committed to providing for their citizen's animals, with reunification of animals and the appropriate owner a priority. This is a complicated mission-tasking that requires a highly organized approach where knowing where the animals were rescued is key.

The Texas A&M VET has witnessed self-deployed animal rescue groups simply remove animals from, for example, flood waters and deposit them on the most convenient high spot with no documentation of location of rescue. They have failed to deliver the animals to the sanctioned animal shelter. Our team has also witnessed the removal of household pets and livestock from safe locations where the animals were being sheltered in place.

The end result of the issues discussed above is that animals of all species are not able to be reunited with their owners. There is a perception that I believe to be true, that many animals are rapidly removed from the disaster area, in some cases to out of state locations. The consequences are two-fold; a family or producer is not reunited with their animals and there is the potential for spread of disease to new areas. Heartworm disease is perhaps the best example of the latter issue.

Texas A&M Veterinary Emergency Team

The Texas A&M VET was formed and officially incorporated into the State of Texas emergency management infrastructure so that the human priority can be fully addressed through dealing with the animal issue. The Texas A&M VET is comprised of faculty veterinarians, staff, and senior veterinary medical students from the Texas A&M College of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences and veterinary medical professionals from the private sector. The VET is focused on providing holistic solutions for the human-animal issue and is active in all phases of emergency management. Senior veterinary medical students at the Texas A&M College of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences participate in all VET activities. This augments immediate operational capacities and also builds capacity for the future. The Texas A&M VET will have educated approximately 1,400 veterinary medical professionals in the emergency management discipline by the end of this academic year. Ours is a capacity building effort.

The Texas A&M VET also builds animal-focused capacities through providing critically needed animal-focused emergency planning support at the state and local level. The team works at the community level to make sure local jurisdictions have effective animal evacuation, rescue, veterinary medical support, decontamination, and sheltering tactical plans in place. This direct planning assistance is provided at no cost to the community and provides a unique educational opportunity in the veterinary medical educational arena with ours being the only program of this type in the country. The VET is also the primary provider of Secure Food Supply planning efforts in the State of Texas. In 2019 alone, the team provided enhanced biosecurity planning expertise for concentrated animal feeding operations in the Texas Panhandle. The operations for which we developed enhanced biosecurity plans controlled in excess of 220,000 animals. The 2020 VET planning schedule will see the team develop plans for an additional 300,000 animals in the Secure Food Supply planning arena as well as a full suite of animal-focused tactical plans for numerous Texas counties.

The Texas A&M VET response activities are typically centered in providing veterinary medical assistance for search and rescue canines and a wide range of mission taskings for resident animals. The Texas A&M VET developed a collaborative partnership with Texas Task Force 1, one of the 28 USAR teams, shortly after inception. Our role is to manage all of the veterinary medical issues that arise during in-state deployments. Search and rescue canines are a key component of the search and rescue effort. The canine search and rescue mission is a highly demanding job defined by strenuous physical exertion in difficult environments. The canines wore trackers in the 2014 Wimberly, Texas flash-flood response and were tracked at covering approximately 13 miles per day in a river-bottom environment. Exertion and wear and tear associated with search operations had the potential to reduce the operational times that the dogs could operate.

The Texas A&M VET focuses on the recovery process at the end of the dog's operational period and through these efforts keeps the dogs working. The team's management of search and rescue dogs includes laser therapy, preventive therapy, and pharmacological intervention. Texas Task Force 1 has reported that the efforts of the VET extends the intra-deployment operational lifespan of the search dogs by at least 50 percent. The reality is that keeping these dogs working provides hope for those that are lost. This is all made possible through a focused commitment of VET members to become search and rescue dog experts as well as investments in medical platforms designed to facilitate treatment and care of the dogs.

The Texas A&M VET also provides support for resident animals throughout the disaster timeline. The team has mission ready packages (MRP) for each phase of the disaster cycle. These include an Animal Evacuation MRP, Animal Shelter Incident Management Team MRP, and veterinary medical support MRPs that are scaled to the demands of the incident being responded to. The suite of Texas A&M VET MRPs provides a holistic approach for dealing with animal-related disaster issues.

Hurricane Harvey provides one of the best examples of the capabilities of the Texas A&M VET. The team deployed with Texas Task Force 1 during the pre-landfall period to provide veterinary medical support for search and rescue dogs. As the storm made landfall and moved up the coast we were tasked with providing veterinary medical assistance and emergency animal shelter support for local jurisdictions. The VET was ultimately assigned to 10 Texas counties across a 400 mile operational theater. The VET's operational platform design and approach to planning

and exercising allowed the team to provide veterinary medical support in an organized and highly efficient manner. In the words of Dr. Jimmy Tickle, formerly with the North Carolina Department of Agriculture, “VET operations were a model for the nation.” The Texas A&M VET provided direct support for 4,000 animals in this deployment. This number escalates significantly when considering that many interventions were performed at the herd or population level.

The value of the Texas A&M VET approach is recognized at a national level as evidenced by the team’s deployment to Butte County, California in response to the 2018 Camp Wildfire. The assigned mission was to provide an Incident Management Team for emergency animal sheltering operations. The Texas A&M VET joined forces with the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service Animal Strike Team for the requested 60 day deployment. The team empowered local resources and provided consistency in management, allowing the mission to successfully conclude after a 30 day period.

The Texas A&M VET also fields a high consequence infectious disease (HCID) MRP. The VET trains for and is equipped to provide veterinary medical assistance when animals are involved in high consequence infectious disease events. Our first HCID deployment was during the 2014 Dallas, Texas *Ebola virus* incident. The VET provided quarantine and monitoring of a household pet belonging to one of the U.S. victims of the disease. This is a particularly timely point of discussion given the concern of the novel *Coronavirus* circulating in China. Household pets belonging to U.S. citizens being evacuated from China are not being allowed to leave the country but the Texas A&M VET stands ready to provide quarantine if necessary. This is, given the potential for the introduction of HCIDs into the country, a critical resource that needs to be available at a federal level.

FEMA Opportunity

Section 1218 of the Disaster Recovery Reform Act (P.L. 115-254) authorizes the Administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to establish a national veterinary emergency teams at accredited colleges of veterinary medicine. This provides FEMA with an opportunity to address the issues discussed above. The capabilities of the Texas A&M VET described above has the potential to provide a significant advancement in federal veterinary medical emergency response capabilities and enhance Urban Search and Rescue capabilities through excellence in veterinary medical support for search and rescue canines. The programs I have described above, represents a significant advancement over veterinary medical disaster response assets currently in the federal inventory.

In closing, I would like to thank you again for inviting me to testify on animal issues in disasters. I appreciate the committee’s commitment to ensuring that the highest priority, human health, well-being, and safety is fully addressed by also addressing animal issues.