



**Written Testimony of Richard Patch, Vice President of Federal Affairs  
American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals**

**House Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management of  
the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure  
Wednesday, February 12, 2020**

Chairwoman Titus, Ranking Member Meadows, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you very much for the opportunity to testify on the importance of protecting animals during disasters.

My name is Richard Patch, and I am the Vice President of Federal Affairs for the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. The ASPCA was the very first animal welfare organization established in North America. Since our founding in 1866, we have worked constantly to alleviate animal suffering. In particular, the ASPCA has a strong history of leadership protecting animals in times of disaster.

We are pleased that local, state, and federal agencies, as well as communities around the country, are increasingly prioritizing the care of animals during disasters. The ASPCA knows firsthand that lack of preparation leads to dire consequences for animals left behind and that the absence of appropriate plans and operations creates burdens and risks for human victims and emergency responders. It is extremely important that we as a society continue to elevate the need to include animals in disaster planning.

**The ASPCA's Commitment to Disaster Response**

The ASPCA regularly deploys nationwide at the invitation of state and local authorities to assist in pre- and post-storm relocation, search-and-rescue, sheltering, and placement of animals during disasters such as wildfires, tornadoes, hurricanes, and floods. Since 2010, we have deployed for disasters across 24 states and territories. The ASPCA maintains memoranda of understanding with cities, counties, and states across the country that specifically define the roles our organization and emergency management authorities will play if we are asked to respond to a disaster. Even when we are not needed for deployment, we often provide remote expert consultation to help agencies prepare and carry out their operations.

In October 2019, the ASPCA, at the request of Sonoma County Animal Services, was on the ground helping animals impacted by the Kincadee wildfire that devastated Northern California. The ASPCA's team of disaster response professionals deployed with emergency response equipment and conducted animal search and rescue requests. We also performed welfare checks on non-evacuated pets and livestock. With support from the ASPCA and other groups, Sonoma County Animal Services was able to assist approximately 1,500 animals.

That response was in addition to our June 2019 deployment, at the request of the Arkansas Department of Agriculture, Livestock and Poultry Commission, to assist the Faulkner County Office of Emergency Management and the Faulkner County Animal Response Team with search and rescue and sheltering of over 70 animals affected by the historic flooding in central Arkansas.

In 2018, the ASPCA responded to a string of natural disasters, including deploying to North Carolina and South Carolina for Hurricane Florence, to Florida for Hurricane Michael, to Hawaii following a volcano eruption, and to California in the wake of both mudslides and wildfires. In that year alone, we assisted more than 9,000 animals through pre-evacuation, field rescue, and post-disaster relief efforts.

For a typical weather-related event such as a major storm or hurricane – which we can track before it makes landfall – the ASPCA's work begins by monitoring the storm and directing resources towards the likely affected areas. We maintain constant communication with emergency management agencies and local

animal shelters to determine the best course of action to help animals in affected communities. Often, we deploy small teams of our responders, supplies, and other resources to staging areas located near locations expected to be heavily impacted. Once situated, those teams can monitor weather and transportation conditions as we await official requests for assistance.

We know that animal shelters are often inundated with displaced animals in the immediate aftermath of hurricanes and other major storms. To accommodate the increase in animals brought to shelters during these events and to ensure that displaced pets can be reunited with families, the ASPCA assists local shelters in advance work, including transporting their adoptable animals out of impacted areas to shelters in our relocation network or to other facilities. During the response to back-to-back Hurricanes Irma and Harvey in 2017, the ASPCA set up a temporary emergency shelter in South Carolina where adoptable animals from impacted areas were transported and cared for before being sent to shelters that could focus on their adoption. During those two storms, the ASPCA helped relocate more than 1,500 adoptable animals from impacted areas to shelters around the country to give them a second chance for a loving home. Working with Wings of Rescue in the response to Hurricane Dorian last year, the ASPCA transported nearly 200 adoptable animals from South Carolina's coast to animal shelters well outside of the storm's path.

In addition to our work on the ground during disasters, our organization provides grants and training opportunities to local agencies across the country to help enhance their animal response capabilities. In cases that do not require our direct deployment, we often consult to provide animal-specific expertise to FEMA and to state and local emergency management teams.

The ASPCA has been a member of the National Animal Rescue and Sheltering Coalition (NARSC) since its inception in 2006. This coalition of national organizations works with states to identify collaborative solutions to major human-animal emergency needs. Additionally, our organization has granted over \$2 million in the past decade to support animals affected by emergencies and disasters. Through our direct deployments, our subject matter expertise and consultation, and our grant awards, the ASPCA leads the nation in elevating the importance of including animals in disaster preparedness and response.

### **Congressional Response to Challenges for Animals in Disasters**

One of the key lessons learned during and since Hurricane Katrina, where an estimated 600,000 animals died or were left to suffer without rescue or shelter, was that animals must always be a part of disaster planning. We cannot forget the images of dogs swimming to rescue boats or stranded on rooftops, nor can we forget the heartbreak of the 9 year old boy separated by authorities from his dog Snowball while boarding a bus to evacuate. Many faced with the difficult choice between evacuating to safety without their pets or staying behind chose to stay with their pets. A Mississippi county emergency manager estimated that one quarter of the fatalities in their area were residents who chose to stay behind with a pet. This is why modern, thoughtful disaster planning should always include animals.

In response to these lessons from Katrina, Congress passed the Pet Evacuation and Transportation Standards (PETS) Act. Introduced by the late Representative Tom Lantos and Representative Christopher Shays, this law requires state and local entities to include in their disaster plans the needs of individuals with household pets and service animals. We have witnessed the benefits of the PETS Act in recent disasters. For example, more emergency shelters now allow families to bring their companion animals with them, and cities and municipalities routinely relax restrictions on animals on public transportation during disasters to aid evacuations. We have also seen increased inclusion of animals in planning and response by FEMA and other federal agencies engaged in disaster response, as well as more collaboration and communication between disaster response groups and local animal welfare organizations.

In 2014, Congress also acted to ensure that veterinarians can more effectively and easily respond to disasters by enacting the Veterinary Medicine Mobility Act. This law specifically clarifies veterinarians' ability to transport and dispense vital medicines while practicing in the field, including during disasters.

Congress can and should address the remaining gaps in the inclusion of animals in disaster planning. In particular, the ASPCA urges Congress to pass H.R. 1042, the "Providing Responsible Emergency Plans for Animals at Risk of Emerging Disasters Act" or "PREPARED Act." This bipartisan legislation, sponsored by Chairwoman Titus and Representative Peter King, will ensure that animals in certain institutional settings – such as zoos, research facilities, and commercial breeding operations – create detailed plans to protect the animals in their care during disasters and ensure that their employees know what steps to take when an emergency occurs. Although these entities are regulated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture under the Animal Welfare Act (AWA), there are no federal requirements that these facilities have emergency or disaster plans in place.

Animals in AWA licensed facilities are particularly vulnerable to disasters and pose a unique high risk to first responders. For example, Hurricane Katrina killed approximately 8,000 animals, including dogs and monkeys, at Louisiana State University's Health Sciences Center School of Medicine. The storm also cut off power to the New Orleans Aquarium of the Americas, resulting in the deaths of 10,000 fish. Many animals in these types of facilities may be dangerous or require highly specialized handling, further necessitating pre-planning that would help ensure they do not escape and put the public at risk. In 2015, big cats and other exotic animals escaped an AWA licensed zoological park in Oklahoma after a tornado struck. The risk to public safety forced the local sheriff to advise residents to stay indoors until the animals were accounted for.

The PREPARED Act is just one of many avenues for policy change to facilitate more effective disaster responses and to save more animals. For example, we see a need for more resources to provide training and equipment for first responders to better handle and care for animals. The ASPCA's National Capabilities for Animal Response in Emergencies (NCARE) survey findings, published in the *Journal of Homeland Security and Emergency Management* in 2017, revealed that more than 75% of responding states and counties reported needs for additional emergency training, expertise, and equipment.

Also, veterinarians need more flexibility to deploy across state lines in response to disasters. While the Department of Health and Human Services' National Veterinary Response Team (NVRT) has been helpful in major disasters, many veterinarians whose expertise is needed in disasters not large enough to meet the NVRT's activation threshold may have trouble attaining waivers to practice across state lines. Regulatory challenges relating to the transport of animals suggest a need for more flexibility during disasters. Hurricanes and other natural disasters don't stop at state lines – neither should the ability to provide emergency care to animals in disasters.

Another policy change that would positively impact companion animals during disasters is a greater use of cohabitated and co-located shelters. Cohabitated shelters house people and pets together in the same space. Co-located shelters house people and pets separately but are typically in close proximity, enabling families to easily and regularly visit and care for their pets (alleviating the burden on responding agencies). According to our NCARE survey, only 50% of counties with fewer than one million inhabitants reported having plans for cohabitational shelters, compared to 80% of larger counties. With the proper planning and implementation, these shelters give pet owners the option of seeking shelter where both they and their pets will be safe. That peace of mind can be solace to a family that has lost everything in a disaster. We encourage FEMA to ensure that cohabitated shelters become the norm for housing animals in disasters. For millions of people, pets are part of the family. It is vital to implement disaster plans that consider the entire family.

We look forward to the opportunity to work with this Subcommittee to find the best solutions to these challenges.

### **Keeping Pets Safe During Disasters**

The PREPARED Act would help protect animals housed in certain federally regulated businesses and institutional settings. However, individuals also have a responsibility to prepare for and take the necessary actions to protect their own animals when a disaster strikes. Though each type of disaster requires different measures to keep pets safe, the ASPCA urges families to take the following general steps to prepare their pets should they be impacted by a disaster:

- First, if you must evacuate, take your pets with you. If it's not safe for you – it's not safe for your pets. Pets should not be left behind or tethered to trees. This will prevent them from escaping emergency situations and getting to safe areas.
- Second, make sure all pets are wearing ID tags with up-to-date contact information. A pet's ID tag should contain his or her name, telephone number and any urgent medical needs. The ASPCA also recommends checking microchip registration information to ensure that contact information is up to date.
- Third, along with the emergency kit for human members of the family, we recommend creating a portable pet emergency kit with essential items including medical records, water, water bowls, pet food, leashes, and any required pet medications.
- Finally, it's important to choose a designated caregiver, such as a friend or relative outside the evacuation zone, who can take care of a pet in the event one is unable.

### **Conclusion**

With natural disasters occurring more frequently, preparedness has never been more important. The ASPCA urges Congress to continue its work to protect animals in need by passing the PREPARED Act and to explore the other measures discussed here today. Thank you very much for the opportunity to testify on this very important topic. I look forward to answering any questions that the members of the Subcommittee may have.