

The Valley Post

The Rescuers

Local Volunteers and Animal Services Scrambled to Evacuate Hundreds of Endangered Pets and Livestock from Recent Fires

By Linda Fridy

Planning and training for the worst disasters paid off for hundreds of Santa Cruz County animals when three major wildfires struck in the past month. In each case, within hours of the first fire engines being dispatched, volunteers braved flames and headed into areas evacuated in order to save animals — from livestock to poodles.



While sheriff's deputies and police knocked on doors, these rescuers open stables, rescuing literally hundreds of horses from certain death.

Below: The County Fair horse stalls with some of the evacuees.

The Santa Cruz County Equine Evacuation Team formed about 10 years ago to be ready for disasters, said the group's emergency liaison Lyn Hood, and the members rose to the occasion.

"This has really been our trial by fire," she said wryly, "and it's gone remarkably well."

The 86 members, who have all earned emergency services certification, joined the county's animal services staff and many kind-hearted community members in efforts to prevent losing animals to the flames.

A total of close to 900 animals of all types and sizes were evacuated in the county's three fires. Of those, 552 were horses and livestock and 323 were domestic pets, according to Tricia Geisreiter of the county's Animal Services.

Even better, before the latest fire was fully contained, only four evacuated cats and kittens remained unclaimed in Scotts Valley, and two dogs and one cat waited in Watsonville. The fairgrounds still housed another 20 to 30 horses and livestock that could not be returned home yet.

"It's been very much a challenge, but we were all thrilled that we could pull together and help our community and the animals," Geisreiter said. "Our staff has been coming in on

our days off, staying open late and coming in early to care for the sheer number of animals."

The vast numbers of horses and livestock evacuated required animal services to operate a shelter at the Watsonville fairgrounds, and when the Martin Fire hit, another was opened at the Graham Hill horse show grounds.

"We've been literally running four animal shelters," she said.

### Saving Horses and More

The county Equine Evacuation Team, as the name implies, focuses its training and efforts on horses.

"I heard some amazing stories from people who got horses into trailers that had never been in one before," Hood said. "Some people have a sixth sense and an innate ability to read an animal and respond appropriately with the right timing."

"They're creatures of habit," said Felton resident Steve Richmond, an evacuation team member and former Cal Fire operations chief for the Santa Cruz/San Mateo unit. "If you bring a step-up trailer to a horse that is used to a trailer with a ramp, there can be difficulties. For example, my horse will load, but only after another horse gets in. I have to play tricks on him."

The horse lovers did not discriminate against other types of animals, either. The volunteers also transported llamas, alpaca, chickens, ducks, cats, dogs, goats, goldfish, turtles and at least one large, old pig.

Equine evacuation volunteers Pat and Bob Verheul of Scotts Valley started their Martin Fire efforts with horses, evacuating one and then transporting another to the Monterey Bay Academy in Watsonville to help free space at the Graham Hill evacuation shelter.

The next day as they waited with other trailers at Wilder Ranch, a call came in asking for help with an older pig.

"We needed a trailer with a ramp because the pig was 12 to 13 years old, blind and couldn't walk," Bob recalled.

He rode along with another responder, Kathy Adams, and with the help of several animal services workers, they managed to push the pig into the trailer. As they finished, the elderly owner hurried over, saying,

"You have to have his blanket. He sleeps with his blanket," Bob remembered. The blend of animals sometimes added to the stressful situation.

### Evacuees Make Strange Bedfellows

Kristi Locatelli, president of the Santa Cruz County Horseman's Association, described how a horse and llama evacuated from the Summit Fire together were initially placed next to a cow.

"The cow wasn't too pleased with that. It had never seen a llama before. We didn't want to stress the cow, so we moved the llama," she said. "A lot of animals got to know each other in an unusual setting."

Richmond said horse owners expressed a lot of gratitude to members of the horse evacuation team, and he knows why.

"When they live in your front yard and they're your buddy — it can get pretty traumatic," he said.

Hood, who spent days on the phone coordinating fire response, marveled at the generosity shown.

"These people are willing to put their lives in some jeopardy to save someone else's animals, and they're volunteers," she said. "One of our responders told me she put over 600 miles on her truck and trailer in the three fires, and with diesel at \$5 a gallon, you can imagine what that cost her. It's all a labor of love."

#### Trabing Fire Claims Animal Casualties

The county's third major fire in less than a month proved hardest on animals and those who care for them.

Faced with a fast-moving fire and no owners at home, too many animals who were right where they should be never had a chance to escape.

Animal Services field manager Todd Stosuy and a colleague happened to be in Watsonville when he received word of the Trabing Fire and got on scene in less than 20 minutes, Stosuy recalled. "Otherwise we wouldn't have made it," he said.

He and his colleague went to every house on Trabing Road and Windsong, but could not save all the pets and livestock.

"The majority that I found [dead] were inside houses, or in a closed yard. Some barns I saw were destroyed with animals in enclosed stalls that never had a chance to escape," he said. Losses, for which he expects there will never be an accurate total, range from birds, cats and dogs to llamas and horses.

"I don't think we'll ever get a head count on these guys," he said sadly.

Most of the animals were lost in the early stages of the fire as it raced along Trabing Road and over the ridge. One house caught fire shortly after he left it.

The decision to close Highway 1, where the blaze began from a vehicle's sparks, slowed response time by those in the northern end of the county.

"It was such a fast-moving fire that I'm not sure no matter what the traffic situation was, we could have made it in time," said Hood of equine evacuation. "It did make it harder and more frustrating.

"Some of our people work in San Jose. They have to leave their jobs, rush home and get their horse trailers," she went on to explain. "It took some three hours or longer to get there."

The last month's fire efforts, and especially the Trabing fire, have taken their toll on Animal Services employees, and Stosuy invited representatives from the United States Humane Society who are experts in animal disasters to come in and work with the staff. They began arriving Monday, June 23, with more expected.

Yet all the news is not bad. Although Stosuy could not always coax reluctant pets out of their homes, he left the front doors open. He found out that one such cat had left his home before it was destroyed and was found by its owner.

#### Lessons Learned

With a long, dry fire season still ahead, those who responded to the recent disasters want to share what they've learned from recent rescues.

Pets and animals should be part of every family's evacuation plan. Animal Services' Geisreiter reminded owners to take their animals with them when they have to leave their homes.

Equine evacuator Hood warned against simply opening barns or corrals for horses, as they can endanger themselves and others.

"If you're close enough to let them loose, grab a rope and lead them out," she said. A rescue trailer can meet someone at an intersection.

If disaster strikes when you are away from home, don't expect to be able to rely on your neighbors, because they will likely be in the same situation. Try to find a friend or family member near enough to respond who knows your animals, Hood recommended, and have a breakaway halter or rope easily accessible.

For indoor pets, Stosuy found that stickers by front doors listing the number and types of pets inside were especially helpful.

Hood noted that a few times, equine response teams arrived at a site that had called for help, only to find that the owners had also contacted others who got there as well.

Although she realizes that people have much on their minds, she asked owners to please call back if they get other help to free up responders for those who still need them.

The more details an owner can provide, from directions and access to animal descriptions, the better prepared rescuers can be. Whether paid animal service officers or volunteers, they understand how important these creatures are.

"Lives cannot be replaced," said Geisreiter. "It's a good reminder that animals are part of our families."

*Shirley Wentworth also contributed to this story.■*