



Veterinarians step up in Cyclones Debbie and Cook

Wayne Ricketts of VCNZ is humbled by the responses of animal rescue teams during the recent Edgumbe flooding.

THIS MONTH'S PIECE is a bit of a departure from my usual regulatory themes. Yet it reflects who we are as veterinarians, and how veterinarians could be more active in the future (canvassed in my VET2031 article in February). This commentary takes into account the other hat I wear as MPI's National Animal Welfare Coordinator, a role that involves managing MPI's lead responsibility for the coordination of animal welfare in emergencies.

The recent tail-end cyclones that hit in April, and were especially damaging in the Bay of Plenty, were testament to the fact that the Asia Pacific region is very prone to hydro-meteorological events (eg cyclones, storms and floods). Such events accounted for more than 70% of intense natural disasters in the region between 1971 and 2010. We also know that hydro-meteorological and climatological disasters (eg droughts), rather than geophysical disasters (eg earthquakes and volcanic eruptions), have been trending upwards in recent decades. We are particularly vulnerable in New Zealand because so many of us live near water.

Disaster preparedness for animals has economic, social and welfare benefits, yet many countries continue to omit animals from their national and regional contingency planning. Responses are often chaotic, inefficient and uncoordinated, or absent altogether. Hurricane Katrina was a wake-up call to the world about what happens if people can't evacuate with their pets (and this also applies to livestock). Often they refuse to leave, or they return illegally to

retrieve their animals, putting themselves at risk, as well as the rescue teams who may have to save them.

Many studies indicate that 20-30% of human evacuation failures are related to pet ownership. Many Edgumbe residents were reluctant to leave without their pets (but were forced to), and there were reports of farmers in the area refusing to leave before they were satisfied their cows were safe.

New Zealand does recognise animals in its disaster planning, but we are still on a learning curve. As the responsible organisation, MPI is assisted by a number of support agencies, including the NZVA.

Urban Search and Rescue, large animal rescue, triage, animal behaviour and swift water rescue. The swift water training was put to frequent use in Edgumbe as the teams negotiated water contaminated with sewage, diesel and debris.

More than 800 animals were rescued, including cats, dogs, aviary birds, poultry and a smattering of livestock – oh, plus a couple of axolotls. Personally, I found it humbling to hear of some of these rescue efforts, and I want to acknowledge the team members for putting their lives in danger to do this.

NZVA Academic Director Lotte Cantley, who also helped out, says: "I felt privileged

"MANY OF THE RESCUE TEAMS ARE VOLUNTEERS WHO ARE SPECIALLY TRAINED, AND THEY OFFER THIS INCREDIBLE SERVICE IN THEIR OWN TIME BECAUSE THEY REALLY CARE. THEY ARE REAL HEROES."

So where do veterinarians fit in? During the recent cyclones, the SPCA's National Rescue Unit was deployed immediately. It was soon joined by local veterinarians Karen Gow, Gillian Hogarth and Chris Peterson. Other local veterinarians also offered their assistance. Massey's veterinary animal rescue team, led by Rachel Stratton, arrived soon afterwards. Team members also include SPCA inspectors and veterinary nurses. The permanent members of these teams have received specific training, such as in

to work alongside the unbelievably hardworking rescue teams that toiled tirelessly day and night, rescuing and relocating hundreds of stranded and bewildered animals from the Edgumbe flood. This was teamwork at its best. With minimal sleep and foul floodwater to cope with, the rescue teams partnered to make this the largest animal rescue that New Zealand has ever seen.

"It was impressive to see everyone working together to make the rescue a success. Everyone knew their role,



and everyone had an important part to play. The morale remained high among the teams as they literally swam through floodwaters to save livestock and pets. The rescue teams had one goal, and that was to rescue the animals and reunite them with owners who had already lost so much. Many of the rescue teams are volunteers who are specially trained, and they offer this incredible service in their own time because they really care. They are real heroes.”

Animal rescue, triage and animal healthcare are just some of the roles veterinarians can be involved with in emergencies. Others include pre-disaster planning, control of disease transmission, disaster assessment, information dissemination, advising clients to plan for

their animals, herd management, and involvement in recovery.

Dr Sebastian Heath, an American veterinarian, says that “emergency managers can take advantage of the bonds people have with their animals to instil appropriate behaviour among pet owners in disasters”.

Veterinarians can also assist with this, Sebastian adds. “Veterinarians play an important role in responding to disasters, but they could play a more significant role by shaping society’s attitudes to animals, and by disease mitigation and preparedness.”

Veterinarians play a critical role in ensuring the safety of livestock and of New Zealand’s food supply and our livestock-based economy.

We need to be ready for possible animal disease emergencies and disasters.

The American Veterinary Medical Association encourages and fosters veterinary leadership in dealing with ‘all hazards/all species’ preparedness for disasters and emergencies involving animals, animal and public health and other veterinary issues.

MPI is now considering how it might create a veterinary emergency reserve across the country to complement and strengthen the SPCA and Massey teams. After speaking to veterinarians in the past few years and hearing presentations at the 2016 NZVA conference about veterinarians in disasters, my sense is that veterinarians have a real keenness to be more involved. Watch this space. ¹⁹