

## **AVMA Situation Report – Southern California Wildfires**

Date: 11/18/03

Location: Southern California

### **Report**

*For information on how you can prepare for disasters visit [www.avma.org/disaster](http://www.avma.org/disaster).*

*For information on how you can help support VMAT and animal disaster preparedness, please visit [www.avmf.org](http://www.avmf.org).*

*For the latest information about the fire visit: <http://www.fs.fed.us/r5/>*

### **San Diego Fires 2003**

A first hand account submitted by: Terry Paik, D.V.M.  
Veterinary Disaster Response Coordinator, SDCVMA, CVMA  
Emergency Preparedness Taskforce, AAEP  
VMAT-4 – Administrative Officer  
Date: 11/16/03

#### **Background—**

Beginning October 21, 2003 in Southern California, twelve major wild-land and urban/wild-land fires ignited in the counties of San Bernardino, San Diego, Los Angeles, Riverside, and Ventura. The fires ignited during extreme fire hazard conditions associated with four years of drought and strong easterly Santa Ana winds, high temperatures, low humidity, and dry vegetation. The fires have destroyed forest wild-lands, residential, and commercial structures, resulted in fatalities and injuries, forced evacuations and sheltering of residents and animals, and disrupted highway, rail and air traffic, telephone service and electrical power.

I left San Diego for a VMAT-4 FTX (Veterinary Medical Assistance Team Field Training Exercise) in Simi Valley/Moorpark on Wednesday, October 22. Driving north on I-5, there was a large brush fire in Camp Pendleton, but there was little risk to buildings at that time. Little did I know...

During our FTX in Moorpark, the Simi Valley fire was spreading like—well, like wildfire! On Saturday we decided to end the FTX and evacuate the troops. Apparently the training was effective as the evacuation included loading and transporting horses as well as cattle, and all went extremely well.

Upon return to San Diego on Sunday, October 27, I found that we were in the midst of what would soon become the worst firestorm in CA history. We had four separate fires raging out of control in San Diego County driven by strong, dry Santa Ana winds.

*(Santa Ana winds are created when there is a stalled but intense high pressure to the east over the Great Basin, and a weak low-pressure system just off shore of Southern California. The high elevation Nevada-Sierra blocks the easterlies (wind from east) and turns it northward and southward. Channeled by canyons in the Great Basin and getting stronger, the hot, intense, and very dry winds finally break through and come down to Southern California, especially through the pass way between San Bernardino and San Gabriel Mountains. Named by the early settlers at Santa Ana, this is why the name of "Santa Ana" came about. Santa Ana winds commonly occur between October and February, and forecasters usually place speed minimums on these winds and reserve the use of "Santa Ana" for winds greater than 25 knots. Wind speeds are typically north to east at 35 knots through and below passes and canyons with gusts to 50 knots. Stronger Santa Ana winds can have gusts greater than 60 knots over widespread areas and gusts greater than 100 knots in favored areas. Frequently, the strongest winds in the basin occur during the night and morning hours due to the absence of a sea breeze. The sea breeze, which typically blows onshore daily, can moderate the Santa Ana winds during the late morning and afternoon hours.)*

The Cedar Fire began about 5:30 p.m. on Saturday, October 25, in east San Diego County. By 9 a.m. the next day, it had burned more than 10,000 acres, its ferocity stoked by stiff desert winds and extremely low humidity. The Paradise Fire began early Sunday morning to the north, creating a nightmare scenario of battling four major blazes, including ones at Camp Pendleton (remember when I left on Wednesday?) and in the Otay Mesa area (south), simultaneously.

Evacuation of families, pets, and livestock began early Sunday morning. The swiftness of the fires had really limited the ability for organized evacuation and housing of animals. However, out of chaos comes order. Primary Large Animal evacuation sites had been established at the Lakeside Rodeo grounds, Ramona Rodeo grounds, and Del Mar Fairgrounds. On Monday the skies were still completely dark with smoke as the fires continued to rage out of control.

Monday, November 27: Presidential Declaration of a major disaster with Los Angeles, San Bernardino, San Diego, and Ventura Counties designated for Individual Assistance and Public Assistance, Categories A and B.

As CVMA/SDCVMA Regional Veterinary Disaster Response Coordinator, I was tasked with coordinating veterinary care in the fire-affected areas. In the San Diego County Disaster Plan, Annex O (dealing with animal issues), the San Diego County Dept. of Animal Services (DAS) is the authorized lead agency. The DAS has an understanding and agreement with the San Diego Humane Society (SDHS). They work cooperatively and all animal cases under the Disaster Plan are referred to them; generally, DAS handles small animal cases (dogs, cats, etc.), and SDHS handles large animal cases (horses, cattle, livestock)—a genuinely cooperative effort.

Numerous agencies sent members to assist in the handling of this disaster. The HSUS, as well as other Humane Organizations, rescue groups, and Animal Control agencies from as far as Northern CA and TX sent representatives. A CDFA representative was also in San Diego.

The local community jumped in immediately, creating and manning evacuation sights throughout the county. Local feed stores and other businesses have been supplying virtually everything needed to care for the horses and other livestock (incl. sheep, goats, pigs, etc.).

The response of the local equine veterinarians was tremendous. They selflessly donated their time, expertise, supplies, and medications without asking for anything in return. When asked repeatedly if they needed any help, they have all said they were doing fine. Local veterinarians were manning the staging areas around the clock. Some major veterinary suppliers began donating and delivering much-needed supplies within the first few days.

Over 2,000 horses and other livestock (burrows, goats, sheep, etc.) were evacuated, many more than once or even twice as they were evacuated to a site which then became threatened and had to be evacuated again.

*As of Wednesday, October 29 AM:*

The Cedar Fire, in the East County had burned 233,000 acres and was the largest in CA history. It was still 0% contained to the east. (It was not totally contained until November 4.)

The Paradise Fire had consumed 45,000 acres. (This blaze would not be fully contained until Nov. 6)

The South Bay Otay Fire was contained.

Over 1,700 homes destroyed, 12 deaths, including one fireman; air quality was still unhealthy to very unhealthy; and all SD schools and colleges were closed

*In the news that AM: "Navy fire suppression helicopters/crews are sitting on the ground as the navy pilots are not "approved" to fly over CDF fires as fire helicopters are being flown in from Nevada!"*

By the end of the week, the Santa Anas had broken down, the weather cooled, and the firefighters were able to get a hand on the fires. Early the following week we got just a touch of rain. Mother Nature...

Saturday, November 1: FEMA/State Agreement signed.

By November 14, mop-up crews were expected to get the calamitous Paradise and Cedar wildfires—the latter the worst in state history—extinguished by the weekend.

Combined, the massive blazes killed 16 people, including the Bay area firefighter, consumed well over 300,000 acres and 2,453 homes, damaged or destroyed another 800 homes and buildings, injured 135, and has cost taxpayers more than \$42 million to date, according to government officials. Eight local veterinarians and paraprofessionals lost their homes to the fires.

Shelter populations varied, but here are some samples:

Lakeside Rodeo grounds, 300; Poway Facility, 50; Miramar Stables, 200; Ramona Rodeo grounds, 300; Del Mar Fairgrounds, 1000; Horse Park, Del Mar, 400. Most were horses, but there was also a sprinkling of goats, cattle, pigs, etc. Any “unowned” horses were moved to Del Mar. By Thursday, October 30, of over 200 unknown arrivals, 180 of them had been claimed and gone home.

I am still in the process of collecting data from local practitioners and other agencies, but overall, well over 2,000 horses and livestock were evacuated. The response from the local community was terrific. In the East County, the primary staging area was created at the Lakeside Rodeo grounds. The Del Mar fairgrounds became the center in the north. Miramar Stables, Ramona Rodeo grounds, the SDHS Poway facility and numerous other locations including private stables provided safe haven at various times, even though some of these locations had to be evacuated as the fires raged and often changed course leading to repeated evacuations of some areas after folks returned thinking the fire had passed and they were safe.

The local citizens turned out to help; folks who felt their homes and livestock were safe, took off with trailers to areas where they thought they could help. Abandoned, stray, and simply liberated horses were showing up at the staging areas, trailered in by good Samaritans, volunteers, and neighbors. Many of these horses had never been in a trailer before! The support from the local citizens as well as the retail community was heartwarming. Food and supplies started showing up seemingly out of nowhere, from halters, ropes, single bales of hay donated by generous individuals to truckloads of hay and feed by local feed stores and hay growers.

As an example of the generosity of the local horse community, on Sunday, a local show park was having a horseshow with ~120 horses. Evacuated horses started showing up as early as 0630 that morning. Over 400 evacuated horses would ultimately arrive. To help the owners and volunteers, the horse show folks ordered pizza for all from the show proceeds; boarders volunteered to help. They stayed, offered to feed, water, and care for the visiting horses, and donated their buckets, rakes, wheelbarrows, etc.

I cannot say enough for the response by the local veterinary community. They were out there in force, treating animals as needed, often without knowing who the owner was, where it came from, or even who brought it in. Medical history?—forget it! And during all this, not asking for anything. The staging areas had veterinarians on site or on call around the clock during the worst of the firestorms and evacuation periods. Over 30 San Diego County equine veterinarians gave a hand. The local small animal veterinarians also opened their hospitals for injured as well as misplaced, lost, and evacuated pets, again, usually at no charge.

Obviously, a number of horses and livestock were treated for burns—scorched skin, singed eyelashes, burns around the coronary band (a most common finding), etc. However, these turned out to be a small minority of conditions treated. The great majority of calls were for colic, trailering injuries, cuts, kicks, etc. Also, a number of horses were sedated to facilitate transport. The number of horses treated by local veterinarians for fairly minor conditions will range into the hundreds. As of now, I know of 6 horses euthanized by veterinarians, 4 due to actual burns, one had a broken leg from being kicked by another horse at one of the staging areas. How many animals were lost in the fires is not yet known. I heard of ~100 horses lost in a North County valley, but that has not been confirmed. There was another report of 20 head of cattle lost to fire in Dulzura.

The CDFA noted that one chicken ranch lost 3,000 chicks because they didn't have electricity and had difficulty with their generator; another farm lost 300 goats. However, data regarding the number of deceased animals is only anecdotal. Rendering companies were in the area still picking up animals as they found them.

Considering the size, scope, and speed of these fires, most of the animal needs were met. There will be much commentary, second-guessing, “should have’s”, blunders and failures. One should remember that as our San Diego fires were raging out of control, there were two massive fires burning out of control just 100 miles north in the San Bernardino Mountains and in Simi Valley. Resources were stretched beyond anyone's imagination.

The list of Thank You's is endless, and most will go unrecognized. I do not wish to mention any specific names at this time, as I cannot begin to list them all. However, I will say that I received calls from veterinarians and technicians from up and down the state offering assistance if needed. From single veterinarians, to small and large associations, from UCD and Western University, 4-H Clubs and more, unsolicited calls came one after the other. The local feed stores started bringing in feed and supplies in the first hours. Later, support spread to national companies. Local and national veterinary supply companies as well as laboratories offered drugs, supplies, materials, and equipment, and actually were shipping needed supplies directly to the evacuation centers. The response from our community was incredible. Public offerings, as usual, came fast and furious.

It was interesting to hear that within the first five days of the fire, the San Diego Chapter of the American Red Cross said they had enough donated goods and supplies. This is typical of our generous community.

This was the largest disaster to ever test the cooperation of the two lead agencies, the San Diego Dept. of Animal Services and the San Diego Humane Society, and overall the event was handled well. It was an honor to work with these agencies and the support from the SDCVMA and CVMA was outstanding.

Of course there were challenges, and lessons learned. And we will go into those in great depth in future meetings. Communication is always the single largest challenge. Other items that need to be discussed are credentialing affording access to restricted areas of qualified personnel. A simple, efficient, and effective identification system for lost or stray and all delivered animals to holding facilities needs to be developed. We also should look at a system to re-supply veterinarians, and other volunteers for out-of-pocket expenses, some system for medical records, and increased coordination between all agencies involved, as well as the private sector.

The initial response to any disaster or event is, and always will be, local. As the veterinary community we need to learn to work better with our local agencies—Animal Services, Humane Society/SPCA, local fire and law enforcement—learn where and how to fit in, know and be known by the major players. Who do we contact? Do they know how to contact us? Do we know how to contact each other?

But just as important, we need to inform, educate and work with our clients. We need to inform them of how the systems work; educate them to help prepare themselves and their neighbors in disaster preparedness. Do they have an evacuation plan? What is it? Does everyone in the family know what to do, where to go, whom to call? What about children at school, parents at work? Elderly or disabled family members? Do they have a designated meeting place after an evacuation? Is there a remote contact person (e.g., out-of-state family member) so distant friends and relatives know whom to call so they are not overloading already-taxed local telephone lines? Is there a local radio station designated to provide information during an emergency or disaster? Do they know which one it is? Do you?

How will they move their animals? Do they have halters, ropes, trailers? Some ID system? Photos or some means of proof of ownership? Do they have safe places identified where they can evacuate to—for fire, for earthquake, for flood? Are they prepared to live without power for 3 days or more? Do they have enough food and water for themselves? For their pets? For their horses and livestock?

These are the areas we can really serve our clients and communities. And remember, before we can help anyone else, we have to be sure we can take care of ourselves, and our families. So, the first question is, are you prepared?