

Meeting the need for a pet evacuation plan

By Frank Bryce For the Sun-News

Posted: 05/07/2011 11:27:51 PM MDT

The Abrams Fire has haunted Las Cruces for weeks. Those who live on the East Mesa tracked it by the hour; in other parts of town, the smoke was visible day and night. Yet while threatening disaster, the fire ignited a positive flame in our community.

Many times when a disaster is looming, or has occurred, we are rightly concerned about the human tragedy and losses. This fire threatened the evacuation of the military base at the White Sands Missile Range. But folks at the White Sands facility and those involved with fighting the Abrams Fire were thinking in a broader context.

Along with concern for the safety and welfare of the military staff and civilians at the base, there was the additional challenge of how to save the animals that might be left behind.

With howling winds and explosively dry conditions, there was a real threat that the wildfire would move toward the post's main facility. Those fighting the blaze recognized this danger. The obvious danger included pets living on post. How to cope with them while evacuees were displaced became a pressing question.

It seemed likely that collaborative efforts of many agencies were required to provide for an emergency response to the potential need of evacuating pets. Distressingly, there was no formal plan in place and initially, response was unfocused.

A phone tree was initiated from the Fire Incident Command to alert the base officials of the possible danger. These officials in turn set in motion a sequence of calls through the White Sands Missile Range Emergency Services. These calls alerted the American Red Cross, which contacted additional agencies.

Shirley Johnson, American Red Cross Emergency Services, and Randilyn Pacheco, Red Cross Volunteer supervisor, in particular, requested assistance of the Humane Society of Southern New Mexico (HSSNM). HSSNM coordinated with the Doña Ana County Sheriff's Department for aid from the Animal Cruelty Task Force members and for use of the sheriff's disaster response van and animal caging trailer.

Curtis Childress, the animal cruelty task force supervisor, promised the availability of the van, trailer and animal control trucks to assist if the evacuation was activated. HSSNM also set in motion their phone tree to alert society members and help arrange housing for an estimated 200 to 250 pet evacuees.

Only a few hours had passed when the response effort was in place. Ed Tatiano and Anita Judd, White Sands Emergency Services, praised the rapid response and availability of those outside agencies involved. Everyone was on standby for what we hoped would not happen. As the evening progressed, the danger diminished.

It is good when a community can test its mettle successfully, but it is even better when the community is ready and does not have to be tested. This is a success story for our community. While we did not have to meet the challenge, in the event the community was ready, willing and able. HSSNM thanks goes out to everyone involved.

Frank Bryce is president of the Humane Society of Southern New Mexico. The column On the Positive Side is an ongoing project of HSSNM.