

# OKLAHOMA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, FOOD, AND FORESTRY

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## **Oklahoma ag dept. plans ahead for animal emergencies**

Wild weather is nothing new in Oklahoma. The Sooner State frequently experiences severe storms, tornadoes and wildfires. The state has a good record of responding quickly to natural disasters including earthquakes, but what happens if many disasters occur on the same day across the state? Will local emergency managers and state agencies be prepared to handle them all?

That was the challenge facing city, county, and state emergency managers who participated in the annual Earth, Wind and Fire exercise coordinated by the Oklahoma Department of Emergency Management. More than two dozen state and federal agencies, utilities and charitable organizations shared their expertise and contributed to the success of the event. The purpose of the exercise was to evaluate the ability of state agencies to communicate with local emergency operations centers acting on their local emergency plans.

The Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry (ODAFF) is among the key agencies involved in planning the exercise. The agency's responsibilities include responding to foreign animal disease outbreaks and coordinating efforts to protect companion animals during disasters. ODAFF stands ready to help whenever local efforts or resources are stretched too thin to meet a community's needs.

Staff veterinarian Dr. Alicia Gorczyca-Southerland carefully plans the state's response to animal emergencies with input from State Veterinarian Dr. Rod Hall. For this year's preparedness exercise, she created 13 possible scenarios local emergency managers might face that involved animals in distress. Throughout the day-long exercise, city and county managers in different parts of the state were challenged to respond to the complications she created for them.

For examples of what might occur, imagine a wildfire is approaching your city and an old fence line with wooden posts is in the path of the fire. Hundreds of cattle will be able to roam freely on a nearby highway when the fence posts burn down. Or, picture a dam break that floods a neighborhood where 300 displaced dogs and cats suddenly need to be rescued, treated for injuries and sheltered. An animal emergency could even involve a commercial aquarium that loses power in a storm and urgently needs large generators to keep its rare and endangered aquatic collections alive.

These challenges and many more were thrown to beleaguered emergency managers in the statewide exercise at the same time they were responding to imaginary fires, floods, tornadoes and earthquakes. All of these nightmare scenarios were intended to strengthen communication

between local emergency managers and their state agency counterparts. Dr. Gorczyca and her network of veterinary partners were ready to respond with personnel and resources to any request received from a local emergency manager.

Steve Mattax, lead evaluator for the exercise, stressed that the scenarios were designed to test local capacity to provide transportation of people and animals in addition to shelter and basic needs. An over-arching purpose of the training was to help state agencies develop better ways to communicate with each other and with local authorities. He reminded participants that all emergencies are local and the state's Emergency Operations Center must focus on supporting local efforts whenever they call with a resource request.

“It was definitely a success from my point of view,” said Dr. Gorczyca. She renewed connections with other agencies and discovered state resources that might be able to help in an actual emergency. She was pleased that community emergency managers used existing teams of veterinary volunteers just as they would in a real event.

Dr. Gorczyca is already planning ways to make next year's Earth, Wind and Fire exercise even more meaningful and challenging.

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Photo caption: Dr. Alicia Gorczyca-Southerland, at right, and assistant Rhonda Keener respond to animal emergency scenarios during the Earth, Wind and Fire training exercise planned by the Oklahoma Department of Emergency Management.



