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PREPARING FOR AND RESPONDING TO EMERGENCY SITUATIONS

The Texas Animal Health Commission (TAHC) was founded in 1893, and for the past 123 years, the mission of the agency has been to protect the livestock, exotic livestock and poultry industries from foreign and emerging animal disease, to increase the marketability of Texas livestock commodities, to promote and ensure animal health and productivity and to protect human health from animal diseases and conditions that are transmissible to people. In addition to those four mission statements, a fifth agency mission statement is that TAHC is to prepare for and respond to emergency situations involving animals.

It is well recognized that TAHC plays a major role in the planning for and response to an animal disease situation. What has not always been recognized is the role that TAHC has in planning for and responding to natural or manmade disasters.

TAHC has been preparing for and responding to emergency situations involving both large and small animals for decades, but TAHC has really only been truly recognized as a state response agency addressing animal issues in natural or manmade disasters for the past 20 years or so.

During the 1990s, TAHC personnel actively responded to many natural disasters that had an animal component. Primarily, the animal component was livestock, but even at that time, TAHC response efforts frequently addressed companion animal issues as well. The problem at the time was that other state agencies didn't know who TAHC was nor what TAHC's role was in regards to emergency response. TAHC assisted locally, but when requests for resources or assistance were made by TAHC on behalf of a local jurisdiction, the state emergency response agency didn't recognize TAHC as the requesting agency.

In 2001, the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease (FMD) caused a crisis in

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British agriculture and tourism industries, resulting in an estimated \$16 billion in economic losses. The severity of this outbreak raised awareness about the value of all-hazards planning for animal issues in disasters, especially in Texas, where animal agriculture is a key component of the state economy. In response to the 2001 FMD outbreak, TAHC hired their first full-time employee dedicated strictly to emergency planning, and that person started actively working on an FMD Response Plan.


Despite making significant strides in disease planning and being recognized as the lead state agency for animal disease response, TAHC was still not officially recognized as the lead state agency regarding animal response in a natural disaster.

It wasn't until after the first full-time TAHC emergency planner started working on written disease plans that TAHC was invited to participate in what is now called the Emergency Management Council. The state Emergency Management Council is composed of 32 state agencies and several nonprofit organizations. According to the Texas Division of Emergency Management (TDEM) website, "The Emergency Management Council is established by state law to advise and assist the Governor in all matters relating to disaster mitigation, emergency preparedness, disaster response and recovery. During major emergencies, Council representatives convene at the State Operations Center (SOC) to provide advice on and assistance with response operations and coordinate the activation and deployment of state resources to respond to the emergency. Generally, state resources are deployed to assist local governments that have requested assistance because their own resources are inadequate to deal with an emergency."

Since becoming an official recognized member of the Emergency Management Council, TAHC has been designated as the state's lead agency for all animal issues during disasters. The agency assists local jurisdictions with development of local animal issues committees (AICs) and AIC plans as well as with the development of specific community animal response plans.

In addition to assisting with local planning efforts, TAHC personnel still actively respond locally to assist with all animal issues in disasters. Recent significant agency response efforts include Winter Storm Goliath and the 2016 May/June rain/flooding. Agency response to these recent events included animal issues assessments for livestock and poultry as well as for companion animals, in addition to providing assistance with coordination of animal search and rescue, evacuation, sheltering and resource request efforts. The TAHC Horseback Emergency Response Team also was activated during Winter Storm Goliath.

While there is still a great deal of work to be done to continue to assist local jurisdictions be better prepared for animal issues in disasters, it is worthwhile to stop and reflect on the accomplishments of the past 20 years. Significant progress has occurred in TAHC emergency management response efforts, and many hurdles have been overcome while developing significant partnerships along the way.

For more information about local planning assistance, contact TAHC at 512/719-0700 or email emcoord@tahc.texas.gov. For more information on TAHC disease and natural disaster emergency management planning and response efforts as well as resources on pet and livestock preparedness, check out TAHC on Facebook, Twitter or YouTube. Links to all three platforms can be found at www.tahc.texas.gov. 



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