INNOVATIVE PRACTICE

Mass Care: Tracking Animals During the Black Forest Wildfire

September 4, 2015

SUMMARY

During the 2013 Black Forest Wildfire in Colorado, the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE) successfully utilized existing technology to develop a system that tracked and reunited evacuated animals with their owners.

DESCRIPTION

On June 11, 2013, the Black Forest Wildfire in El Paso County, Colorado, forced the mandatory evacuation of 500 homes, making it the single most destructive fire in Colorado history in terms of residential properties lost. Animal evacuation and reunification in such situations usually presents considerable logistical and organizational challenges. El Paso County and CDPHE adapted a patient tracking system designed for the Veteran's Administration (VA) to assist with tracking rescued animals. The VA had recently conducted the National Disaster Medical System exercise at the Denver International Airport using the patient tracking system, so they agreed to send a team to Elbert County to test the system during the Wildfire.

Cortney Perez of Lyons, Colorado evacuated to a shelter in Longmont, Colorado with her dog and birds (Photo Credit: Cliff Grassmick, AP Photo/The Daily Camera)

Local responders fitted each evacuated animal with an identification barcode bracelet. CDPHE staff wrote descriptions of each animal and uploaded photographs into the tracking system. Owners could then identify their animals either online or in person while they were still at the evacuation facility. Once the owners had identified the animals, CDPHE added owner information to the tracking system.

El Paso County and CDPHE successfully used the system to track rescued animals throughout the entire event, including back and forth between El Paso and Elbert Counties as the fire moved, and then reunite them with their respective owners during the disaster. Moving forward, CDPHE intends to make minor modifications to this existing system and proposes sharing this resource with local jurisdictions.

REFERENCES

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