



River Delta Fire District

16069 JACKSON SLOUGH ROAD
ISLETON, CA 95641

News Release – River Delta Fire Protection District

For Immediate Release Date: August 25, 2021

Contacts: Fire Chief, Paul J. Cutino

Subject: Wide-area wildfires involve more than just squirting Water

Few events are more complex than wide-area wildfires. While the main focus often involves fire crews, firefighting aircraft, and challenging weather, lots of other things occur behind the scenes.

One of the elements in an effective wildfire response involves the safe and effective removal, relocation, and care of pets and domestic livestock. Fire Chief Paul Cutino of the rural River Delta Fire District near Isleton understands this issue.

"Livestock is valuable property," said Chief Cutino. "In many cases, small-plot livestock are like members of the family. In other instances, they may be critical to a family's livelihood. The problem that often occurs is that fire personnel are often committed to suppression efforts and local animal control agencies can quickly get overwhelmed. Often stakeholders and owners find themselves forced to fend for themselves."

The Humane Society of the United States conducted multiple surveys. Upwards of 90% of respondents said that they would take personal risks to save their animals. According to the NCBI, "Premature return to evacuation sites because of missing pets is another problem that occurs during evacuations. It is estimated that up to 80% of people who prematurely reenter an evacuation site do so to rescue a pet." These data show that animals left in emergency zones present complicating issues for emergency responders and those tasked with securing emergency areas, as well as creating significant stress and anxiety among people ordered to evacuate.

In a 2007 study of elderly, primarily low-income adults in Georgia, 16.2% of participants said that they would not evacuate without their pets and 8.1% would stay at home with their pets during an evacuation. There is no reason to believe that statistics in rural California would be much different.

Willis Lamm was Contra Costa County's livestock evacuation lead during the 1998 floods. He described the problems that can develop when an incident exceeds planning capabilities.

"During earlier events, we had an effective plan for relocating animals from inundated areas to the fairgrounds and other facilities. In 1998 all bets were off as those facilities were also uninhabitable. While we managed to handle the problem with the assistance of competent civilian volunteers, we were definitely scrambling, and we realized that more in-depth planning was definitely required."

Lamm, who was in the fire service at the time, acknowledged that current wildfire behavior can present even more complex problems. Plus, many rural fire agencies recognize the problem but as they don't have unlimited staffing, they are limited in capacity when incidents become overly complex.

The River Delta Fire District addressed this issue using a more global approach. Chief Cutino developed relationships with qualified non-governmental organizations to provide competent auxiliary assistance in the event of major incidents that involved livestock. Some fire district personnel have trained on livestock issues alongside civilian volunteers. The River Delta Fire District provided a surplus Multi-Casualty Incident Support unit to be utilized by the volunteer responders as a Technical Large Animal Incident Support vehicle.

As Chief Cutino explained, "The district currently responds to large animal and livestock incidents, however in the event of an impending flood or wind-driven fire, we are going to likely rely on outside resources to effectively address the animal component. Developing relationships and sharing resources before an extreme event occurs can be critical to ensuring competent and effective responses during worst-case events."

The Caldor fire is the latest illustration of the effectiveness of cooperation among mutual response partners. When the Amador County Fairgrounds reached capacity, Evacuation Teams of Amador (ETA) have established a satellite Large Animal Evacuation Center at the Lawton Ranch in Jackson. Assistance in the form of corral panels and other equipment came in from allied response organizations from as far away as Nevada. The Incident Support Unit, which had previously responded to the Tamarack Fire, is now providing large animal incident support services in Jackson for the Caldor fire. As of this writing, over 700 animals are now being sheltered at the ETA Evacuation Center at Laughton Ranch.

Chief Cutino explained, "We really have to look at these kinds of events using a broad perspective. How can we best serve the citizens in general? How can we help facilitate solutions while not impacting our ability to protect our local citizens? One practical option involves developing alliances that can bring in needed resources if we get hit hard locally."

Lamm is now the livestock evacuation Field Supervisor in Lyon County, Nevada. He added, "I've known Chief Cutino for a long time. He's a great practitioner of logically thinking outside the box to get things done. I love the Delta and pray that there won't be another disaster down there, however, if a situation appears ominous, we're all in this together. We'll be on our way with equipment and personnel."

Evacuation Teams of Amador are currently taking on an incredible workload. People and entities that can loan them durable equipment or donate supplies, and qualified people in the area who can help volunteer at the ranch should call Bobbi Laughton at 209-419-2000 for more information. "You don't need to be an animal expert. There are plenty of tasks needing doing from logistics to using a shovel."

Images attached:



Center on Laughton Ranch



the Evacuation Center

The Incident Support Unit, staffed by Least Resistance Training Concepts (LRTC,) arriving at the Evacuation Center.



###