

Testimony – Joint Ways and Means Subcommittee on Natural Resources - ODA Governor’s Budget:

Testimony – IN SUPPORT of ODA Policy Package 110 – Emergency Management Coordinator:

Mary A. Whitlock, DVM
Junction City, OR

Practicing Veterinarian in Lane County since 1985

OVERT – OR Veterinary Emergency Response Team member since 2008

Veterinary representative assisting Lane County in the development of Lane County Animals in Disaster Response Plan since 2008 – INTENT – Preparing Lane Co. Emergency Management/Lane Co. Animal Services/Citizens of Lane Co. for an emergency response.

December 2018 – Veterinary Medical Team Leader – one of the 4 OVERT/ODA veterinarians along with 22 others who went with the ODA/OVERT veterinary medical/shelter response to Butte County, California to help State of CA. OEM and Butte County during Camp Fire animal response.

September 2020 – worked with Lane County Animal Services/Lane Co. Animals in Disaster – helped Lane Co/Greenhill Humane Society set up and implement animal response to Holiday Farm Fire. Provided over 200 volunteer hours helping Lane County Animal Response during month of September 2020.

The PETS Act of 2006 (Pets Evacuation and Transportation Standards Act)

was passed by Congress, following Hurricane Katrina, to ensure that State and local emergency preparedness operational plans address the needs of individuals with household pets and service animals following a major disaster or emergency. This was the mandate for our states, counties and communities to make sure we are better prepared to respond in an emergency situation – helping make sure families and pets/livestock are to be able to evacuate their homes/property. Unfortunately as was the case in Katrina, when pets/animals were not able to be evacuated along with their humans, people chose to stay with their animals and both animals and people perished.

We were tested on all levels regarding our readiness in Sept. 2020. The State of Oregon experienced unprecedented Wildfires in 2020 – destroying hundreds of thousands of acres of public/private lands, communities, businesses, homes along with the injuries or deaths of numerous people, wildlife, livestock and personal pets as citizens were forced to flee to safety. Trying to help the folks whose lives were forever changed by the Holiday Farm Fire during the month of September 2020 was the toughest, most stressful veterinary associated work I have ever done in my life.

Was the State of Oregon along with all counties and municipalities ready for this conflagration? No, we were not. No entity could ever be ready for the firestorms our State experienced last

year – but we certainly could have done a better job of preparedness on the human and veterinary side.

The State Veterinarian's office which is ODA has been trying for over 15 years to develop a strong state Veterinary response team – ready to be contacted and respond to outbreaks of foreign animal diseases that could devastate our economy/food chain, along with state disaster response. However, unfortunately, the funding for ODA to recruit, train and maintain up to date training of the OVERT team has never been adequate or reliable. A strong OVERT team program could also encourage OVERT team members to become involved in helping their own counties develop strong county and local veterinary response plans and teams.

Dr. Ryan Scholz, newly appointed State Veterinarian, did an incredible job during this unprecedented disaster event in our State – however, additional planning should/could have helped the State coordinate more efficiently/rapidly their efforts to help the counties that had overwhelming wildfires at the same time in the state. A full time Emergency Management Coordinator can focus on making sure the State of Oregon is better prepared to help the counties when called upon again in the future.

Our Oregon counties weren't prepared for the conflagration of Fall 2020 either. A veterinary colleague of mine and our local Humane Society helped Lane Co. write our Lane Co. Animals in Disaster Response Plan in response to the PETS Act back in 2009. Unfortunately due to lack of dedicated funding and the misdirected lack of urgency perceived by Lane County, the Lane County Plan was sitting on the shelf when the fires began Labor Day 2020. Not knowing what the Response Plan was set our County back several days in trying to determine what the animal response should be. I know Lane County was not the only County not prepared.

I ask that the Budget is enhanced to add the full time Emergency Management Coordinator – responsible for ODA emergency response activities related to food supply, water safety, animal welfare and maintaining agriculture market access. All Oregonians are impacted when these areas are threatened by wildfire, other natural disasters, foreign animal diseases, biosecurity issues, etc.

Following the disastrous wildfires of 2020, I hope that the State of Oregon, all counties, communities, businesses, families all work together to improve our emergency response. The fires of 2020 were not a one and done; this is going to happen again due to drier conditions we are seeing all over our state. This coordinated effort amongst these stakeholders must be strengthened ASAP.

Please approve this ODA request and I also ask you as legislators to approve other requests for increased funding for Emergency Response – human or Veterinary – during the budget process. We must be better prepared.

Thanks for your time.
Mary A. Whitlock, DVM