



February 1, 2021

**Senate Bill 103
(Support)**

Senate Committee: Natural Resources and Wildfire Recovery

Dear Chair Golden, Vice-Chair Heard, and Other Committee Members:

This past summer, three dozen wildfires across western Oregon ravaged more than 1 million acres, killed nine people, wiped out several towns, and destroyed many homes and businesses in their paths. Thick smoke and threatening fires forced more than 40,000 Oregonians to vacate their homes. Amid this devastation, hundreds of volunteers scrambled to rescue pets and livestock. There were numerous reports of people driving through the fires to reach isolated animals.

Alongside the well-meaning efforts to help from all avenues of animal owners and animal care providers, there was considerable confusion and uncertainty – especially during the disaster’s initial stage – regarding responsibilities and resources for transport, housing, and medical treatment of affected animals. Our perspective comes from the many phone calls and emails we received from individuals, organizations, businesses, and local agencies who sought guidance for their efforts in providing for animals affected by this disaster. They had many questions, but not many answers.

We appreciate that the State of Oregon recognizes many pet owners are reluctant to leave their animals behind during disasters; timely human evacuation can depend on adequate provision of housing for animals, lest citizens remain in place to preserve emotional or financial investments in pets and livestock.

With the mission statement of Oregon Emergency Management in mind – “to lead collaborative statewide efforts to get help in an emergency” – Senate Bill 103 moves us in a good direction, reassigning the primary responsibility for companion animal planning from OEM to ODA-Animal Health. We believe this change simplifies the process and makes practical sense to have the leading authorities for both livestock and companion animals within the same agency.

However, we have several questions about this important legislation that we don’t have answers for:

- Currently, OEM serves as the point of contact for local emergency management agencies, and coordinates federal support. Will this responsibility, as it relates to animals during a disaster or emergency, remain with OEM or transfer to ODA-Animal Health?
- If this is the case, will necessary funding be redirected from OEM's budget to help cover expenses we expect ODA-Animal Health will incur while carrying out these additional responsibilities? Animal Health has 11 employees, including the State Veterinarian and two District Veterinarians, and several of the staff are in dedicated positions or designated for the state's diagnostic laboratory. The program is as lean as ever over the past 20-plus years and coordination of animal evacuation efforts cannot occur without some budgetary support.
- From what we understand, presently, ODA-Animal Health serves in a supportive role during a disaster or emergency only at the invitation of Oregon counties. Will this continue to be the case or will this change under SB 103? If so, how?
- Much of the confusion during the recent wildfires centered around the uncertainty as to who actually were the key decision-makers for the evacuation, shelter, and care of pets and livestock. As we listened to yesterday's committee hearing on SB 103, we were pleased to learn that Gov. Kate Brown's budget includes funding for an emergency coordinator within ODA. Although this position is not fully dedicated to animal-specific disasters and emergencies, the individual selected for the position will be critical in helping to resolve – and answer – the types of questions about decision making that surfaced during the wildfire disaster this past year. And this position will bring Oregon closer in alignment with many states that have allocated resources for a dedicated coordinator for animals during a disaster or emergency.

The Oregon Veterinary Medical Association supports SB 103 and is committed to helping our state and fellow citizens in caring for animals during a disaster or emergency. Following last year's wildfires, we met via Zoom with the Carlson College of Veterinary Medicine and others to discuss how we in the profession can better prepare – this includes training – for such events and strengthen our coordinated efforts with the State Veterinarian, OEM and others. We also are available to participate in a working group that more fully addresses how best we can accomplish this.

Sincerely,

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