



The Pets Evacuation and Transportation Standards Act of 2006:

What Is It? How Does It Impact Pet Owners?

By Rob Benedict

The primary mission of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is to reduce the loss of life and property from all hazards, by leading and supporting the Nation in a risk-based, comprehensive emergency management system.¹ The multitude of hazards this nation is faced with can have far reaching effects that are indiscriminate on who or what they damage and destroy. The randomness of disasters was most recently demonstrated with the landfall of Hurricane Katrina. Katrina devastated numerous states in a multitude of ways. Financially, the hurricane was the costliest in US history with an estimated total of 81 billion dollars in damages.² Katrina also cost over 1,500 people their lives.³ Humans were not the only ones affected. Throughout the affected region animals were injured, displaced, or killed. The US is a nation of pet lovers with approximately 358 million pets living in 63% of homes.⁴ It is because of this affection towards animals that the fact that 600,000 animals lost their lives or were left without shelter during Katrina was so devastating. Although Katrina will long be remembered for its destruction, its aftermath has fostered and driven improvements in emergency management such as the Pets Evacuation and Transportation Standards (PETS) Act.

Introduction of the 2006 PETS Act to the United States Congress

The Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (the Stafford Act) constitutes the statutory authority for most FEMA disaster response activities and programs.⁵ This act was signed into law on November 23, 1988 and it amended the Disaster Relief Act of 1974. These acts neglected to include any stipulations to include pets. Hurricane Katrina highlighted the fact that many individuals when faced with a decision between evacuating and abandoning their pets or risking their own personal safety and staying with their pets often chose the later. Thus, the issue of animals needed to be addressed in emergency planning, not only the safety of the animals but for the safety of their owners. The late Congressman Tom Lantos (D-CA) and Congressman Christopher Shays (R – CT) responded to calls for such legislation and authored the PETS Act. This act was designed to amend the Stafford Act to ensure that state and local emergency preparedness plans address the needs of individuals with pets and service animals following a major disaster.⁶

The versions that were introduced in the House and the Senate did vary marginally. The House version of the bill called for emergency preparedness plans to include consideration of people with pets and service animals before a disaster strikes. The Senate version included granting FEMA the authority to assist in the emergency preparedness plan development with regards to people with pets and service animals. Furthermore this version



included financial support from FEMA to create emergency shelters for people with their animals, and allows the provision of essential assistance for individuals with household pets and service animals.⁷ Many, including the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), feel that the Senate version was more comprehensive. Although from its inception the bill received overwhelming support there were some instances where it was faced with limited opposition. The two most vocal opponents stated that the bill would be an “infringement on state authority” and were concerned that human lifesaving plans were getting “diluted” because they were going in “too many different directions.”⁸ Despite this opposition the PETS Act managed to pass less than a year after its introduction on May 22, 2006, by a vote of 349 to 29 in the house. The Senate version was less contested and on Aug. 3, 2006, the Senate version of the bill by unanimous consent.

Requirements of PETS Act for FEMA and State and Local EMAs

The PETS act requires states to include stipulations requiring emergency preparedness authorities to consider animals in their disaster plans to qualify for FEMA grants. Neglecting to include household pets and service animals in disaster plans will disqualify jurisdictions from some FEMA funding. Furthermore, the PETS act authorized federal funds to be used to help create pet emergency shelter facilities.⁹ These funds are to be used for constructing, retrofitting, leasing or renovating shelter facilities to allow these facilities to accommodate both people and animals. Lastly, the PETS act allows FEMA to modify existing legislations in order to ensure that Federal assistance is provided in a disaster for the rescue, care, and shelter of household pets and service animals and their owners.¹⁰

Expectations and Impact of the PETS Act on the Pet Owner

The PETS act also has an impact on individual pet owners throughout the United States. FEMA has provided suggestions and best practices for pet owners. FEMA suggests "All households should stock emergency supplies for 72 hours of relative independence, until systems come back on line, or help arrives."¹¹ The rationale behind the 72 hours timeframe is that after a disaster infrastructure may be damaged, and public safety services such as police and fire departments may not be able to respond immediately.

Emergency Preparedness for the Pet Owner under the PETS Act

Preparation before a disaster is essential, especially for the pet parent, because disasters are so unpredictable and involve pets that depend on their human’s action for survival. Preparedness must take place before the event for best results. Preparation is best conducted in calm and relaxing setting with plenty of time to make the right decisions. Before a disaster strikes pet owners should identify a shelter that accepts both animals and people or one specifically for animals. Finding a backup shelter is also a good idea, in case the disaster limits access to shelters. As mentioned previously a 72 hour survival kit, including the pet’s food and water supply, medicines, secure pet carrier(s), pet hygiene products, and ideally some toys (to keep the pet busy) is encouraged particularly if the family is evacuating. Plans need also to be made for sheltering in place events. Pet owners should ensure that their pets and/or service animals have proper and up to date identification tags



along with updated veterinary records as these are mandated by a majority of emergency shelters and rescue groups.

Importance of Not Leaving Pets Left Behind During Disaster

FEMA's main suggestion for pet safety is simple; do NOT leave your pets behind. If you are forced to evacuate bring your pets with you. As hurricane Katrina demonstrated pets most often do not survive on their own. If you are not forced to evacuate it is important to bring your pets inside before the disaster. After a disaster, FEMA suggests leashing your pets when they go outside and stay in close proximity to them. Disasters dramatically change environments and can make a previously safe and familiar neighborhood dangerous due to flooding, downed power lines, debris, etc.

Resources Available for Pet Owners Regarding Emergency Preparation

Additional information on the PETS act and emergency preparation for animals can be found at the FEMA and the HSUS websites or you can contact your local Humane Society to acquire resources for pet owners.^{12, 13} The Chemical Stockpile Emergency Preparedness Program and FEMA also have developed a video, "Animals in Emergencies for Owners", to help animal owners prepare to protect their animals during emergencies.¹⁴

FEMA's mission is to reduce the loss of life and property from all hazards. The PETS act of 2006 enhances FEMA's mission by expanding its reach to include animals. The passage of the PETS act marks a landmark in emergency management, for the 358 million pets and their owners in the United States, designed to remedy the errors in the emergency management seen in Hurricane Katrina.

References

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- ⁴ <http://www.house.gov/shays/news/2005/september/PETS.pdf>
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