



Jim Lytle

University personnel consider animal safety

By Laura Whelan

While some people are preparing for a biological crisis with duct tape and plastic, Mississippi State University representatives are considering the animals in the food supply and the veterinarians who examine them.

John Huston, the MAFES Prairie Research Unit facilities coordinator, knows he cannot predict a crisis impacting animals, but he wants to be prepared. He serves as an animal technician on the Veterinary Medical Assistance Team, a federally funded program providing disaster relief to animal victims.

In December, he attended an intensive VMAT training session in North Carolina. Participants were trained in animal handling, foreign animal diseases, bioterrorism and food safety, and they went through a mock disaster situation of a hurricane hitting North and South Carolina.

"The training was intense because right now we have a heightened awareness of the potential threats that exist, especially terrorism," Huston said.

Since 1998, VMAT has provided veterinary assistance in disasters such as Hurricane Floyd in North Carolina, the foot-and-mouth outbreak in the United Kingdom and the World Trade Center attack.

When a crisis occurs, VMAT issues a call to its members. The veterinarians and technicians respond on a voluntary basis because of the typical 30-day commitment required. Members work cooperatively with local veterinarians and emergency responders to triage and stabilize patients.

"It is critical to work with the organizations that already exist in a disaster area," Huston said. "From the events of Sept. 11, 2001, we learned how important it is for groups like the police, fire department and emergency medical teams to work together in a crisis. We would apply this same tactic to a disaster involving animals."

Huston said the purpose of the training and instruction was to reinforce procedures and protocol so that if a disaster occurs, the response is second-nature.

"You want to get to a point where your response is so prepared, you don't even have to think about it. You just react quickly and efficiently," he said.

Huston is also trained to deal with the possibility of bioterrorism, which he defined as "any intentional act using a biological agent as a weapon." He said the main concern is that bioterrorists could use airborne weapons to contaminate the food supply, possibly by targeting large feedlots that contain 50,000 to 100,000 animals.

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JOHN HUSTON

“These areas are vulnerable to attack, and we have to be aware of the risks. An attack on our food supply could be devastating,” he said. “After all, the strength of a nation is its ability to feed its people.”

The Prairie Research Unit has its own biosecurity plan in place in case of a disease outbreak or emergency. The Unit monitors visitors closely and has no fence-line contact with other animals. Workers use rubber boots and disinfectant to minimize disease transmission.

Huston said that although the public needs to know the dangers and be ready for the possibility of a threat, they should not live in fear or panic.

“A lot of people are paying attention to the risks right now. We have to be aware, but we can’t allow it to inhibit our lives or our happiness,” he said. “Preparation allows us to become organized and educated. We need to have plans in place so that if a disaster strikes, it has a minimal impact on our animals.”

MSU’s College of Veterinary Medicine is also making an effort to educate veterinary practitioners about preventing and preparing for disaster situations or disease outbreaks.

Dr. Carla Huston, John’s wife and assistant professor of epidemiology in the College of Veterinary Medicine, recently lectured on biosecurity procedures at the Foreign Animal Disease Short Course at MSU. Forty-one practitioners, 15 MSU faculty members and 15 veterinary students attended a series of seminars concerning bioterrorism, foreign animal disease transmission and biosecurity.

“Biosecurity refers to measures taken to prevent the introduction or reintroduction of diseases into susceptible populations. Biosecurity measures would help us prepare for acts of bioterrorism, and might even prevent disastrous consequences,” she said. “For farmers and agricultural workers, these steps include quarantine of new or sick animals, knowing the sources of new additions, cleaning and disinfecting, and restricting visitors and vehicles.”

Carla Huston also reported that vets have a heightened awareness of bioterrorism and biosecurity measures. She is a member of MSU’s College of Veterinary Medicine Disaster Committee, which meets several times a year to discuss disaster preparation on a college level and functions as a liaison to the Board of Animal Health.

“Vets are at a level of heightened awareness concerning the threat of disease or disaster,” she said. “They are becoming more aware of their surroundings and clients, and they are reporting anything unusual they may find in their animals.”



Marro Nicovich



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John Huston