

OKLAHOMA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND FORESTRY

2800 N. Lincoln Boulevard, Oklahoma City, OK 73105-4912

PRESS RELEASE: FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

July 6, 2016

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:

Dr. Alicia Gorczyca-Southerland, 405-522-6144, Alicia.Gorczyca-Southerland@ag.ok.gov

State vet's office is ready for anything

Be prepared. The familiar motto of the Boy Scouts runs through Dr. Alicia Gorczyca-Southerland's mind constantly. As a staff veterinarian for the Oklahoma Dept. of Agriculture, Food and Forestry (ODAFF), she is charged with making sure the agency can respond to any animal emergency quickly and effectively.

ODAFF is the lead agency charged with responding to foreign animal disease outbreaks that would be devastating to the state's livestock industry and economy if unable to contain the spread of disease quickly. Specialized trainings and functional exercises help ODAFF be better prepared in their response capabilities.

In recent years, Oklahoma has experienced many devastating storms, tornadoes, floods and fires that have placed ODAFF veterinarians in a new role of coordinating an emergency response on a statewide basis when requested by a local jurisdiction. Dr. Gorczyca works with staff in the ODAFF State Veterinarian's office and many partners outside the agency to find shelter and transportation for animals that have lost their homes or have been evacuated from a life-threatening situation.

Before joining the state agency in 2013, she worked at a private veterinary clinic when an EF-5 tornado roared through Moore, Okla. Many of her clients lost their pets in that massive storm that resulted in injuries, fatalities and animals running loose in the streets. That experience strengthened her determination to help communities prepare for the unexpected.

A large part of Dr. Gorczyca's work involves training volunteers who are organized into County Animal Response Teams or CARTS. Each team is comprised of credentialed volunteers and only deploys to assist in an incident if requested by local emergency managers. Once activated, these teams serve a role in providing sheltering, triage, or search and rescue operations for animals directly involved in a disaster. Currently, there are four fully functional CARTS encompassing Haskell, LeFlore, McClain, Payne, and Sequoyah counties. Three additional CARTs are in varying stages of development and will be ready to respond in the near future.

"We try to be supportive and build up the local capacity through development of animal response teams. All disasters start locally and end locally," Dr. Gorczyca said. She encourages local groups to contact her if they are interested in starting a local CART.

If an emergency is so severe or widespread that more help is needed, ODAFF has a memorandum of understanding with the American Humane Association (AHA). AHA is a valued partner in emergencies and can bring in resources and personnel to handle an incident of any magnitude.

Other great resources ODAFF uses outside of the CARTS are the following teams: Oklahoma Large Animal First Responders (OLAFR) and the Humane Emergency Animal Response Team (HEART). The OLAFR team is made up of experienced horsemen and veterinarians all credentialed through the Oklahoma Medical Reserve Corps. They can help horses, cattle and other livestock that need to be evacuated, sheltered, or require treatment for injuries sustained following a disaster. HEART is based out of Tulsa, Okla. and also has credentialed volunteers through the Oklahoma Medical Reserve Corps. This team specializes in companion animals and has the ability to evacuate, shelter, and provide medical treatment for small animals affected by any disaster.

For more information about ODAFF's emergency plans or ideas on how your county can get involved, contact Dr. Gorczyca at Alicia.Gorczyca-Southerland@ag.ok.gov or 405-522-6144.

XXX

Photo caption:

Dr. Alicia Gorczyca-Southerland coordinates Oklahoma's response to animal emergencies.

