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The Season of Storms

Charley, Frances, Ivan, and Jeanne. In Florida’s 2004 season of storms, each name represented a hurricane that was powerful and destructive in its own right. However, with all four hitting within a six-week period from mid-August to the end of September, their cumulative effect made history.

It started Friday, August 13, when Hurricane Charley, a category 2 storm, crawled up the west coast of Florida with its eye on the Tampa Bay area. That afternoon however, Charley suddenly shifted to the northeast and increased in intensity to a category 4 hurricane, slamming into Charlotte County and quickly following Highway 17 northeast through Central Florida.

For the next few weeks, The HSUS coordinated companion animal response efforts for Charlotte, Hardee, and DeSoto

SERO Director Laura Bevan with one of the dogs sheltered during last year’s Florida hurricanes.

Horrors of Hog Dog Fighting Revealed in Raid

This past December, law enforcement authorities made a coordinated sweep across four states, shutting down the nation’s largest hog dog fighting operation over the course of a weekend. Federal and state authorities, accompanied by members of HSUS’s anti-animal-fighting task force, participated in a multi-state raid in Alabama, South Carolina, Georgia, and Arizona. Hundreds of animals were seized and several of the fighting ring’s organizers were arrested on a variety of felony charges, including animal cruelty.

SERO Regional Coordinator Sandy Christiansen was on site in South Carolina where many of the animals were seized. He coordinated efforts to move them to safe shelter over a multi-state area. Many of the dogs, scarred and injured from the fighting arena, were found either chained or penned up in squalid conditions. Hogs were found with broken legs and ears barely attached to their skulls.

“The practice of staging fights between pit bulls and captured hogs is illegal under the laws prohibiting animal fighting in South Carolina,” said South Carolina Attorney General Henry McMaster. “Like dogfighting, these activities are barbaric, inhumane, and will be vigorously prosecuted in South Carolina.”

Hog dog fights, also known as “hog dog rodeos” or “hog catch trials,” are a form of animal fighting in which trained pit bulls are put into a small arena to chase down and pin wild hogs. The pigs—like the one above—emerge from the events with severe injuries.

The activity came into the public spotlight when an Alabama television station released undercover footage taken at a bloody hog dog event. Since then, deeper investigation by The HSUS has revealed hog dog fights to be a growing phenomenon, organized regularly in at least 10 states.

North Carolina and Tennessee: Welcome to the Region

As of February 1, 2005, North Carolina and Tennessee joined the states covered by HSUS’s Southeast Regional Office. Our staff looks forward to working with animal advocates in these states. You can reach our office at 1624 Metropolitan Cir., Ste. B, Tallahassee, FL 32308; 850-386-3435; www.hsus.org/sero.
Combating animal fighting has long been a priority for our office. The fact that people pit two animals in an enclosed area to tear each other apart for human entertainment and financial gain is proof that we are not as civilized as we like to believe.

Now one of our states has launched an organized campaign to stop animal fighting, and its efforts are paying off. In South Carolina, David Tant, believed by some to be the general of the HSUS, has been a priority for our office. The fact that people pit two animals in an enclosed area to tear each other apart for human entertainment and financial gain is proof that we are not as civilized as we like to believe.

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The HSUS and the The Fund for Animals (The Fund) officially joined forces in an unprecedented and historic combination on January 1, 2005. This is the first time in the history of the animal protection movement that two national, high-profile organizations have united in order to advance their common mission.

“Our groups have decided to join forces not out of necessity, but because we believe we can do more to help animals together than we can do operating separately,” said David O. Wiebers, M.D., chair of The HSUS’s board of directors.

The two groups plan to operate their advocacy programs under the banner of The HSUS, building a new external affairs department to focus on major defining issues such as fur, sport hunting, factory farming, and malicious animal cruelty, including animal fighting. They will pursue these goals with a multifaceted approach involving investigations, litigation, communications, and professional campaigning.

“With our new campaigns, we will create meaningful social change for animals,” said Wayne Pacelle, president and CEO of The HSUS. “Our goal is nothing short of a kinder and more compassionate society for all creatures great and small.”

Ending the Year Investigating Dogfighting

With SEROs’ focus on stopping animal fighting in this region, it was appropriate that the group saw out 2004 assisting in a dogfighting case. On December 31, the Gadsden County Sheriff’s Office asked for help in reviewing evidence at a property where 26 pit bulls were seized the night before under suspicion of dogfighting. SERO staff arrived on the scene and located a dogfighting pit, broken down and covered up with plastic in the back yard. Sheriff’s detectives, unfamiliar with animal fighting ventures, had not seen the pit when seizing other evidence.

Lt. Jim Conder of the Sheriff’s office described the dogs as “all torn up. Some had open wounds; others were scarred up.”

SERO’s Laura Bevan and Sandy Christiansen visited the dogs at the local shelter. One female dog had no upper lips; her muzzle was basically torn off,” according to Bevan. “Another was so emaciated and abused that she could barely stand. When she was given a meal, she wolfed it down as if she had not eaten in a long time. It was heartbreaking.”

Three weeks later, SERO staff testified in court that because of the fighting history of the dogs, none could be adopted as pets. County Court Judge Steward Parsons agreed and regretfully signed for all the dogs to be euthanized. “In the end, it was the most humane decision,” Bevan says. “We wanted to save as much as we could but, in the end, we simply had to do it.”

Racetracks Win, Greyhounds Lose in Florida

Animal lovers suffered a disappointing loss last Election Day when Florida voters narrowly approved an amendment to the state’s constitution allowing for expanded gambling at pari-mutuel facilities. The ballot measure, Amendment 4, allows dog track owners to install slot machines at tracks. This will provide tens of millions of dollars in annual revenue to a dying industry that’s responsible for the deaths of thousands of young, healthy dogs each year.

By propping up the industry with new funds, the greyhounds will continue to run for their lives even if no one is in the stands watching or betting on them. As state lawmakers determine how to implement the amendment, The HSUS and other humane groups and individuals will continue to oppose the expansion of gambling at Florida’s 16 greyhound tracks. We hope our members join us in ending this abusive industry.

SEERO Program Coordinator Sandy Christiansen visits with a dog who shows the terrible wounds of animal fighting.

This bird wears the artificial spurs used in cockfighting.

Cockfighting Also Exposed

While the South Carolina Animal Fighting Task Force has focused much of its efforts so far on dogfighting, cockfighting has also made its prevalence known. Commissioner of Agriculture Charles Ray Sharp pleaded guilty and resigned his post following an investigation related to activities designed to protect an organized network of cockfighters. The charges included extortion, money laundering, and making false statements to federal law enforcement officials.

“Commissioner Sharp abetted a barbaric form of animal cruelty, broke a range of federal laws, and completely violated the public’s trust,” said HSUS President and CEO Wayne Pacelle. “In exchange for thousands of dollars, he used his connections and his stature to provide protection for an organized criminal network of cockfighters.” Bills filed in the South Carolina Legislature would increase the penalty for cockfighting from a misdemeanor to a felony.

SEERO Director Laura Bevan celebrates availability of Florida’s Animal Friend license plate with state lawmakers.

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Changing Lives in Terrell County, Georgia

In many parts of our region—such as Terrell County, Georgia—people love their pets but cannot afford to provide them with routine veterinary care. By bringing veterinary services to poor and underserved communities in our region and around the globe, HSUS's Rural Area Veterinary Services (RAVS) helps people care for their companion animals.

RAVS utilizes the services of volunteer veterinarians, technicians, and veterinary students from all over the country. For the students, the clinics are a great teaching tool and an excellent opportunity to practice what they have learned in school (under the careful supervision of certified veterinarians). For the community, the clinic brings veterinary care that pet owners may not be able to afford otherwise. RAYS provides not only essential services such as sterilizations and vaccinations, but also educational services such as talks on disease prevention and pet care.

That's why SERO joined a RAYS team at a Lions Club building in Dawson, Georgia, where volunteers and staff provided spay/neuter surgeries for more than 70 animals this past February. The Humane Society of Terrell County (HSTC) had contacted RAYS to assist with the sterilization of pets from its lowest income areas. The small organization works hard to help the citizens in its county but has been limited in being able to offer free spay/neuter. The RAYS clinic was a perfect way to assist them in this goal.

One lucky patient was Ranjan, a two-year-old shepherd mix and the best friend of a Terrell County boy named Frankie who had lost his parents and lives with his aunt. Ranjan arrived at the RAYS clinic on the end of a heavy chain. After RAYS staff and volunteers tested him for heartworm, neutered, and vaccinated him, HSTC made arrangements to treat Ranjan's heartworm and provide fencing so that he could live off of the chain. Frankie's aunt recently contacted HSTC to report how much happier Ranjan is since he's no longer chained.

While the RAVS program is designed for pet owners like Frankie—those who want to do the responsible thing for their pets but simply can't afford it—RAVS also helped several other homeless animals who found their way to the Terrell County Clinic. One of these, a boxer mix clinic volunteers called Sampson, had been abandoned at the business next door to the clinic. According to the business's employees, Sampson had been homeless for at least a year. He was malnourished, heartworm positive, and had severely broken teeth as well as a skin condition exacerbated by living only off of scraps from workers' lunches.

During the clinic, Sampson enjoyed belly rubs and sandwiches, and as volunteers packed up the clinic on Sunday afternoon, Sampson rode away in the back of a Lincoln Expedition, headed for royal “spa” treatment at a local veterinary clinic. “I am so thankful to find my new friend with his gentle spirit,” exclaims Sampson's new guardian, Kim Terrell. “I read the other day that saving one dog won't change the world, but the world will surely change for this one dog.” Thanks to RAVS, HSTC, and dedicated volunteers, the world is a better place for many Terrell County animal companions and their families.

More RAVS clinics are planned in 2005 for Georgia and Tennessee. For more information about RAVS, go to www.hsus.org/ravs.

New SERO Program Coordinator Jen Hobgood with Sampson, a lucky dog who found not only veterinary care, but also a loving owner thanks to a recent RAVS clinic held in Dawson, Georgia.

A volunteer veterinary student is happy to help a patient during the Terrell County RAVS clinic. RAVS provides excellent training for students while helping pet owners in need.
This kitten seems to be saying "thanks" to a disaster responder.

through the peninsula, Frances was slow and blunted with rain. Joan Carlson of the Humane Society of Vero Beach in Indian River County stayed in the organization’s new animal shelter along with staff, volunteers, and hundreds of dogs and cats. She described a storm that took almost 24 hours to pass, and pushed the limits of those trapped in the buildings with no power and little contact with the outside world. Later that shelter became the base for The HSUS’s operations over several counties.

Less than two weeks later, Hurricane Ivan tore through the Caribbean with category 5 winds and rain. Entering the Gulf of Mexico, it was expected to make landfall along the Mississippi coast. However, “Ivan the Terrible” had other plans. On September 16, he shifted to the northeast, ripping across the southeastern tip of Alabama and northwest Florida as a category 3 hurricane. Coastal communities were destroyed, and devastation occurred far inland. The HSUS fielded two teams in response to Ivan—one to assist animal efforts in Alabama and one in Florida. The final indignity came September 21, when Hurricane Jeanne, another category 3 storm, made landfall just a few miles from where Frances had hit only 20 days before. Jeanne had spun harmlessly out in the Atlantic for some time before changing her mind, do­ing a U-turn, and heading straight for Florida’s Treasure Coast. Once again, The HSUS based its efforts off the Humane Society of Vero Beach, which sustained even more damage to its facility the second time around.

By Laura Bevan, Director of the Southeast Regional Office

Changing Times

A quote from Bob Dylan sang, “The times, they are a changing.” Since last summer, that has become the mantra of our efforts. In the six-week period from August to October, we were still responding to the aftermath of Hurricane Frances, which was slow and blunted with rain. Joan Carlson of the Humane Society of Vero Beach in Indian River County stayed in the organization’s new animal shelter along with staff, volunteers, and hundreds of dogs and cats. She described a storm that took almost 24 hours to pass, and pushed the limits of those trapped in the buildings with no power and little contact with the outside world. Later that shelter became the base for The HSUS’s operations over several counties.

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When the last SERO newsletter hit your mailbox, we were still responding to the four hurricanes that impacted Florida over a six-week period from August to October. While those storms changed so many lives and so much of the landscape in Florida, thankfully Tallahassee, our home base, was spared. That allowed us to focus our time and energy helping others around the state. Though by the time Hurricane Jeannehammered herself across the state along an almost identical path to Frances, energy was in short supply.

While the face of Florida was changing, so was our office. In November, Andrea White, SERO administrative assistant, resigned after 17 years with The HSUS to pursue her dream of going to college. Andrea and I started our journey with HSUS’ hurricane response. Cats and dogs weren’t the only ones to benefit from HSVS’s hurricane response.

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