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The Great Floods of '97: New Year Begins on a Wet and Tragic Note for People and Animals in Region

The first few weeks of January were a time of fear, loss, and tragedy for numerous people and animals in Western states. As 1996 drew to a close, a tropical storm system, called the Pineapple Express, pounded the region with record rainfall. The resulting floods, which left parts of Washington, Oregon, Nevada, Idaho, and California in shambles, are believed to have claimed the lives of more than 20 people and thousands of animals.

In northern California, steady warm rains dissolved mountain snowcaps causing devastating mudslides and necessitating massive releases of runoff waters from dams. A combination of rain-swollen rivers, high tides, and a succession of levee breaks forced the evacuation of tens of thousands of people, pets, and livestock throughout California’s fertile Central Valley. While maintaining contact with local humane societies and animal care and control agencies within the affected states, WCRO responded to communities needing assistance.

WCRO Director Eric Sakach assembled a disaster response team, including WCRO Program Coordinator Geoff Simmons, Southeast Regional Office Program Coordinator Ken Johnson, and Companion Animals Senior Associate Jorge Ortega.

The HSUS team first responded to Yuba County where they worked under the direction of California Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA) Disaster Area Veterinary Coordinator Dr. Garry Goemann and Yuba County Animal Control Director Bob Tiedemann. Using a large tent erected by military personnel, the team first helped to set up a triage facility adjacent to Dr. Goemann’s veterinary practice in Marysville. During the week that followed, team members helped to coordinate rescue efforts using boats in heavily flooded areas and later assisted with the field rescue of hundreds of stranded and displaced dogs, cats, horses, and livestock in the communities of Olivehurst, Linda, and Arboga. Officers from the Yuba-Sutter SPCA, Placer County Animal Control, and El Dorado County Animal Control and personnel from the University of California at Davis, the California Department of Fish and Game Office of Oil Spill Prevention and Response, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service provided additional assistance.

Rescuers brought animals to the triage facility where they were examined and given veterinary treatment. From there, animals were moved to a holding facility operated by another organization until they could be reunited with their owners. While many horse owners and livestock producers had hurried to move their animals to higher, safer ground, others were either unprepared or caught by surprise. According to Sakach, one such incident had tragic consequences for a dairyman who lost more than 200 cows when a saturated portion of the levee collapsed. “It was a gruesome scene of tangled bodies that will haunt all of us forever. One look and you knew these animals had suffered terribly,” Sakach said.

The HSUS disaster team members enter a flooded Yuba County home to retrieve pets for their worried owners.

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The Humane Society of the United States...  

HCUS’s disaster team worked alongside owners of horses and farm animals, helping to round up loose animals and move them to higher ground. But there were times when the risks were too high. During attempts to get a herd of 35 cattle out of high water, the team’s efforts were held up by numerous floating containers, propane tanks, diesel fuel tanks, and other hazardous materials. Helicopter crews reported that 20 of the animals found their way to a small island. Daily drops of hay were arranged to help keep them alive, but the rest of the herd was never sighted again. As floodwaters receded in Yuba County, HSUS team members were confronted by the terrible aftermath of the floods—hundreds of dead farm animals scattered across the countryside.

Following their efforts in Yuba County, the HSUS team moved on to San Joaquin County where they were joined by HSUS staff member Chad Sinerios and two representatives from the American Humane Association (AHA). The team coordinated animal rescue operations with San Joaquin County Animal Control to evacuate the City of Tracy Animal Shelter. Team members helped Tracy and Stockton Animal Services officers evacuate and transport more than 40 dogs and cats to the Alameda County Animal Control facility in Dublin. “Thankfully, the animal shelter in Tracy did not end up under water,” said Sakach. “But their decision to transfer the animals was the correct one given the rapidly changing conditions. It was much safer to remove the animals at that stage than it would have been if we were waist-deep in contaminated water.” All of the animals were returned to Tracy over the next several days.

During rescue operations ended and local recovery efforts got under way, WCRCO continued to offer assistance and monitor developments in the hardest hit areas, which were still being plagued by continual rains and the threat of more flooding. In late January, Sakach met with members of the CVMA Disaster Preparedness Committee to review disaster relief efforts for animals during the floods. While these are always similarities, no two disasters are ever exactly the same. There’s a great deal to be learned by everyone from a disaster of this magnitude,” said Sakach. “Among other things, this disaster demonstrated how important it is for horses and livestock, as well as companion animals, to be included in local emergency planning.”

HSUS Program Coordinator Chad Sakach carries a rescued potbellied pig to a dry cage.

California

• A.B. 21, introduced by Assemblyman Keith Oberly, allows anyone or company that obtains an incidental take permit for killing wildlife from the federal government to bypass the stricter California Endangered Species Act, thereby negating most oversight by the state of California. HSUS position: Oppose

• A.B. 716 would revise the current definition of poultry to include gamefowl (fighting cocks). Any products needed to raise, trade, or sell gamefowl would be tax-exempt, as would be the birds themselves. HSUS position: Oppose

• A.B. 68, introduced by Assemblywoman Valerie Brown, repeals the 45-year-old opinion of the Attorney General that pets adopted or sold through animal shelters are a taxable commodity. Currently, pets adopted from shelters and services rendered in order to make them adoptable are considered taxable, including the spay/neuter deposit, health exams, microchipping, disease testing, and deworming. This bill, backed by the Board of Equalization and The HSUS, marks a significant change in attitude by lawmakers toward pets. HSUS position: Support

• S.B. 1143, introduced by Senate President Byron Sher and Jack O’Connell, bans the use or manufacture of the steel jaw leghold trap. S.B. 1143 will also prohibit the use of dogs to hunt bears, bobcats, raccoons, opossums, foxes, coyotes, or any fur-bearing mammal. Sponsored by the California Wildlife Protection Coalition, of which The HSUS is a member, this bill would end some of the more cruel and unsporting hunting practices in California. HSUS position: Support

• S.B. 78, introduced by Sen. Mike Thompson, extends existing provisions that allow taxpayers to contribute portions of their state income tax to the Rare and Endangered Fish, Wildlife, and Plant Species Account in the Fish and Game Preservation Fund. HSUS position: Support

• S.B. 80, introduced by Sen. Quentin Kopp, allows any municipal animal shelter or humane society to directly purchase sodium pentobarbital for euthanasia if the agency has staff that have been properly trained in its use and if the agency has a license from the federal Drug Enforcement Administration. Currently, shelters must go through a licensed veterinarian to purchase sodium pentobarbital, which has proven problematic for those shelters that do not have a veterinarian on staff. HSUS position: Support

Nebraska

A bill to ban the abusive practice of deliberately tripping a horse for certain types of rodeos failed to pass. Similar prohibitions have passed in six other states; it is a big disappointment that Nebraska legislators failed to pass this ban.

Oregon

The year 1997 should prove a landmark one for animal welfare legislation in Oregon. Bills may be introduced this year to address canned hunts and transportation of horses sold to slaughter, the ownership of exotics, mandatory spaying or neutering of shelter animals, and a clarification of the legal status of wolf hybrids.

Washington

Possible legislation for this year’s session may include the introduction of a bill dealing with puppy mills, the creation of a low-cost spay/neuter program to fund low-cost spay/neuter operations, a ban on chaining dogs (several local ordinances have passed in Washington banning the practice already), and trapping legislation.

Legislative Update

Following is an update on legislative activity and a list of bills that need your support. HSUS staff are constantly in contact with legislators and local activists to help promote humane legislation and to stop bills considered inhumane. We cannot guarantee that the position on the bills will remain as reported here, as bills may be unfavorably amended. As of this writing, the Oregon, Nevada, and Washington legislatures are just starting their sessions and have had very few bills introduced.

We have listed possible legislation for those states; however, for up-to-the-minute information and to learn how you can become more involved in your state’s legislative process, write or call the West Coast Regional Office.
Cruelty in Live-Animal Markets Must Stop

Citing grossly inhumane slaughter practices and unsanitary conditions for animals in San Francisco’s live-animal markets, the San Francisco Commission on Animal Control and Welfare (SFCACW) recommended in November that the sale of live animals for food be banned. The recommendation has been given to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors for consideration.

The action came after a series of meetings between local officials, animal protection groups, and merchants in the Asian-American community. Earlier news coverage in the Bay Area focused on filthy living conditions and inhumane handling and slaughter practices, including shocking video documentation of groups of frogs in bags being slammed and turtles being dismembered while fully conscious.

In addition to having attended a number of meetings with city officials, animal protection groups, and merchants, WCR0 Director Eric Sakach wrote to members of the SFCACW, the mayor, and the Board of Supervisors, urging a total ban on sales of live animals for food in San Francisco.

“IF the Board of Supervisors fails to act,” said Sakach, “there is a possibility that a proposal will go to the voters.” WCR0 will keep members informed on this important issue.

Bay Area Dogfighters Sentenced

In the Fall 1996 issue of the WCR0 Regional News, you read about a raid on a major dogfighting ring in the Bay Area. Three men involved in the operation were indicted. Two of the defendants pled guilty to charges of felony dogfighting and cruelty to animals. While one of them awaits sentencing, the other received additional time in state prison. Charges against the third defendant were dismissed.

Reflect for a moment...

How can I help animals and receive income and tax savings at the same time?

By making a planned gift to The Humane Society of the United States, you can assure that animals will receive the protection they need while providing significant tax savings and income to yourself. Naming The HSUS as a beneficiary of your estate or trust demonstrates your lasting commitment to animal welfare and strengthens the society for future tasks. We will be happy to send our latest information on planned giving and our programs to help animals.

Mail this coupon in the envelope enclosed or send it directly to The Humane Society of the United States, WCR0, P.O. Box 417220, Sacramento, CA 95841-7220.

Name ______________________________
Address _____________________________
City __________________________ State ______ Zip __________
Phone ____________________________

Strong Message to Hunters

In Oregon, The HSUS worked with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife to defeat Measure 34, sponsored by the Oregon Hunters Association. Measure 34, which would have repealed 1994’s Measure 18, which banned bear baiting and hound hunting of black bears and cougars, was rejected by voters by a margin of 57 percent to 43 percent.

In Washington, Initiative-655, which bans bear baiting and the use of dogs to hunt black bears, mountain lions, bobcats, and lynx, passed by a whopping 63 percent to 37 percent. The HSUS worked with more than 65 other groups on the “Yes on I-655” campaign to ensure its passage. To everyone who worked so hard on these initiatives or voted for them, we extend our heartfelt thanks.

Attention, California and Nevada Members! The HSUS Needs Your Help To Stop Cruel Trapping and Hunting Practices

We would like to repeat the terrific victories for wildlife that happened during the last election in Washington and Oregon (see article below). But this time we are looking to win big for wildlife in California and Nevada. We know that with the help of dedicated HSUS members, we will succeed in making the entire West Coast Region a more humane place for wildlife.

Please consider collecting signatures for the ballot initiatives described at right. As we’ve proven, your efforts make a tremendous difference.
Finding Balance

As the most recent disaster to hit Western states came to a close and the long process of recovery began, I had a chance to reflect on the collective experiences of the staff members who made up our disaster team. Each of us was deeply affected by the terrible loss of life and suffering endured by people and animals. Like many of the victims, we experienced fatigue and sporadic feelings of helplessness from being at the mercy of nature’s destructive forces. Like my colleagues, I am still haunted by the mental snapshots of the more grotesque scenes of drowned and suffering animals we encountered in the field.

But part of the recovery process involves finding balance. For me, that balance comes from recalling the images associated with each successful rescue and the tremendous outpouring of concern and support of so many caring people. Of course, there is a story behind every animal who was rescued, but the daring rooftop rescue of a stranded border collie named Rodeo by a Channel 3 helicopter crew from Sacramento was an exceptional moment. At that point, Dick Burns, a former agency information officer and longtime friend of The HSUS, was able to work with the agency and put forth a commitment to every community’s emergency planning.

To all of the organizations, agencies, veterinarians, and volunteers—and to all of you who called to offer your support—thank you!

New FEMA Guide Addresses Animals

When disaster strikes, planning should be in place to address the care and control of animals too. That’s the message being delivered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in its new guidelines to state and local emergency planners. In FEMA’s Guide For All Emergency Operations Planning (SLG-101), the agency issues specific recommendations—for the first time—pertaining to the welfare of animals. In the guide, FEMA recommends that state and local planning teams include members of the animal services community as a group having a role or stake in emergency response.

In acknowledging the more than 100 million pets in the United States, FEMA Director James Lee Witt says his agency “recognizes the importance of including animal welfare issues in the development of emergency plans.” The HSUS agrees. With the help of Dick Burns, a former FEMA public information officer and longtime friend of The HSUS, we were able to work with the agency and put forth a commitment to all the victims of a disaster.

For additional information on disaster planning for animals, please contact the Disaster Services Program of The HSUS at 2100 L Street, NW, Washington, DC 20037.