

IVMA May 2018 article

Animals in Traffic Incidents

Thousands of animals, both livestock and companion animals, travel on Indiana roadways every day. While rare, there are times when these animals are involved in a traffic accident or end up running loose on roads. First responders, like law enforcement (LE) and firefighters, are usually, as the name implies, the first people who arrive at the incident site.

First responders, however, don't always have firsthand knowledge of animal behavior. Likewise they aren't necessarily aware of best practices for extricating entrapped animals.

Veterinarians can have a positive impact on the welfare of animals involved in traffic incidents. Veterinary assistance may be as simple as temporarily housing companion animals or as complicated as deploying to the incident site - providing guidance on best practices for extrication of trapped livestock, expertise on containing loose animals, and professional assessment of the survivability of injured animals.

Veterinarians and veterinary technicians interested in assisting first responders with animals in traffic incidents should prepare ahead of time. If you are interested in assisting with large animals it would be beneficial to learn acceptable methods of large animal extrication, called technical large animal emergency rescue (TLAER). In-person classes are provided by various organizations including but not limited to: Nature's Way Animal Rescue, nwart.org (an IN based group) and Technical Large Animal Emergency Rescue, tlaer.org. There are multiple other organizations that provide technical rescue training. There are also books available, including Technical Large Animal Emergency Rescue by Rebecca Gimenez.

Board of Animal Health personnel can provide TLAER awareness level training.

However, in addition to understanding the technical aspect of animal rescues like behavior, containment options, and extrication techniques, veterinarians and veterinary technicians need to be familiar with the incident command system (ICS). ICS is used on every incident by first responders so veterinary personnel need to understand how it works. This will make communicating with first responders more effective. There is free on-line training on ICS that can be found at: <https://training.fema.gov/is/courseoverview.aspx?code=IS-100.b> (I know, simple right?).

Once you understand ICS you will be surprised, and possibly alarmed, to find that when you arrive on a scene first responders may designate you as the Incident Commander (IC). In a nutshell this means they put you in charge of handling the incident. Preferably they will retain IC and use you as a resource to provide guidance (and drugs when appropriate) on how the situation should be handled.

In general LE activity at a scene is traffic control while Fire and emergency medical services (EMS) handle human injuries and fire concerns. Tow truck operators handle removing vehicles and small amounts of hazardous material. HAZMAT teams are called in if there are significant hazardous materials or a large quantity of hazardous materials are present.

Dealing with animals on-scene is not the only part of handling an incident. Animals must be removed from the roadway. A list of resources for containment, transportation, and temporary housing is invaluable in resolving a traffic incident involving animals. If you can find local providers for these services it will be immensely helpful to first responders in clearing the incident off the road. This resource list may also be welcomed by your county emergency management agency (EMA) for possible use in disaster situations.

So now you understand the technical animal rescue process, you understand ICS, and you have a list of resources, there's another aspect of assisting with animals in traffic incidents and that's the road, more accurately, it's the motoring public. It can be easy to become focused on the situation in front of you, it is of paramount importance you remember where you are at all times and have an escape plan – just like when working with livestock in a 'normal' situation. Motorists don't always obey LE and can drive in to your work area so you need to have an escape plan, conversely you need to know where the line is between the incident and active traffic lanes. It's best to stay as far away from that line as possible.

LE and Fire personnel are trained to handle traffic and human issues involved in traffic incidents. They are not as well versed in how to handle animals in traffic incidents. This is where veterinarians and veterinary technicians can step in. Veterinary personnel can have a significant impact on animal welfare in traffic incidents by providing that expertise. Veterinary involvement also impacts the safety of first responders. Veterinary personnel do this by explaining animal behavior (like stampeding cattle or a frightened Chihuahua) but also by speeding up the process of clearing the incident from the roadway. Understanding what needs to be done or can be done and giving direction to the rescue operation will speed up removal of the animals which, in turn, speeds up the entire process of getting the incident cleared, meaning LE, Fire, EMS, and tow truck operators get off the road sooner than if veterinary personnel weren't involved.

If you are interested in assisting first responders with animals in traffic incidents follow the above suggestions and visit with your city LE, county LE, and fire fighters. Provide them your office and after-hours phone numbers along with information on what animals and situations you are able to assist with. First responders, the animal owners, the animals, and even the motoring public will be thankful you did.