HSUS Helps in Katrina’s Wake

As the National Guard entered New Orleans to quell civil disorder coming in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, members of the HSUS National Disaster Animal Response Team (DART) worked their way into the nearly obliterated regions of southern Mississippi and Louisiana. The situation could not have been more urgent in both areas, with reports of animals locked in homes, kennels, veterinary clinics, and other locations. It was a race against time for our first responders on the ground.

The presence of HSUS personnel was good news for nearly 130 dogs and cats in Gulfport, Mississippi. There, HSUS team members rescued these animals from the animal shelter of the Humane Society of South Mississippi, which was flooded by the combination of a storm surge with an overflow discharge of human waste from the sewage treatment plant next door. Some animals swam in their cages for hours, somehow managing to keep their heads above water. Others were not so lucky.

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An airboat moves down a flooded New Orleans street September 5 with animal rescue workers, a rifle-toting guard, and several rescued dogs. With thousands of stranded pets in the city, HSUS rescuers were frantically trying to reach as many animals as they could.

PNRO Bucks Deadly Tradition in Omak

Every summer, the town of Omak, Washington, bears witness to a deadly ritual—the Omak Suicide Race. This year PNRO organized a team including HSUS investigators, video crew, and three equine veterinarians to observe and document the event that last year claimed the lives of three horses. Since 1983, 21 horses have died in the race, and an untold number have suffered injuries.

In the dark of night and with the sound of a starting pistol, the first of four races begins. Riders spur and whip their horses into a full gallop for 120 yards to the edge of Suicide Hill, where they plunge 210 feet down a 60-degree slope covered with loose, wet sand—an invitation for broken bones, serious injuries, and fatalities. The team observed several horses lose their footing on the hill and somersault to the bottom.

Horses who survive the dangers of Suicide Hill are raced into the Okanogan River, which is strewn with jagged rocks that often cause horses to trip and go under the water as they navigate the 100 yards to the opposite bank. More than one horse has drowned over the years, prompting organizers to keep a boat at the ready to euthanize downed horses or rescue unseated riders.

As the animals struggle out of the river, riders whip and kick them into a gallop up a gradual grade to the finish line 500 feet away. Although the entire experience may take as little as 36 seconds to complete, the surviving horses appeared exhausted, and our veterinarians observed several showing signs of lameness.

“This event forces horses into a hazardous and dangerous situation, inflicting emotional stress, terror, injuries, and possible death for the sake of entertainment, financial gain, and bragging rights,” said PNRO Director Bob Reder. The race participation bears this out. This year 17 horses entered the first race. Entries may race in all four races unless event veterinarians disqualify them or the owner pulls the horse out. The overall winner is selected by a point system. On the second night, the field was reduced to 11; the third night, 10; and on Sunday afternoon there were only nine competitors. Nearly half of the horses were either disqualified by the race veterinarian or could not compete because of injuries.

Given the negative attention the race now draws, it seems the event may be on its way out. Please support our efforts and those of many other animal protection groups in putting an end to this spectacle of cruelty. For more information, please contact our office.
Animal Fighting In WA a Felony Offense

In October 2004, police raided the home of Eduardo Ribaya in Vancouver, Washington. Authorities seized 21 pit bulls, a photograph of three pit bulls attacking a live boar, and various veterinary supplies and equipment associated with dogfighting. When the Vancouver City Attorney asked PNBO Regional Director Robert Rader to assist in the case, a weakness in Washington’s animal fighting law became evident. Authorities charged Ribaya with only five misdemeanor counts because they did not believe there was enough evidence to meet the felony level of proof in the narrow scope of the existing felony law. At a subsequent press conference in Vancouver, Rader promised that The HSUS would use its resources to help strengthen the law. On May 16, 2005, Washington Governor Christine Gregoire signed H.B. 1304, making dogfighting and cockfighting class C felonies, punishable by as many as five years in prison and a $10,000 fine. The law became effective July 1, 2005.

Sponsored by Reps. Tom Campbell (R-2) and Lynn Kessler (D-24), and unanimously approved by the Legislature, H.B. 1304 specifies that a person commits the crime of animal fighting if that person knowingly owns, possesses, keeps, breeds, trains, buys, sells, or advertises or offers for sale an animal with the intent that the animal be engaged in a fight with another animal. It also addresses the horrible act of taking a stray animal or stealing a pet for the purpose of animal fighting, training, or baiting for animal fighting. Until now, animal fighters from nearby states such as Oregon, where the activity is already a felony, would relocate their animals to Washington. Any fines and penalties incurred were simply considered the cost of doing business, because participants in animal fighting make large profits from gambling on the outcome of matches. The animal fighting language was successfully amended to the bill, which also makes it a crime of animal cruelty in the first degree if a person starves, dehydrates, or sulficates an animal to a point where the animal suffers unnecessary or unjustifiable pain or death. Neglect of this nature is now a class C felony.

The HSUS is grateful to the work and dedication of the sponsoring legislators and testimony given by prosecutors, humane officers, and animal protection advocates.

Taking a Bite Out of Idaho Dogfighting

We’re thrilled with the legislative victory for animals in Washington, but Idaho remains one of only two states that do not carry felony level penalties for dogfighting. Idaho is also one of only nine states that do not have a felony provision for extreme and intentional acts of animal cruelty.

Now, thanks to the ongoing efforts of our office, Reps. Tom Trail and Donna Bor, Idaho Humane Society Director Jeff Rosenthal, and the Idaho Department of Agriculture Animal Law Review Committee, Idaho’s animals have a chance. Efforts are underway to reintroduce both felony animal fighting and felony animal cruelty legislation, but we need your support. Please contact your representative and voice your support for this much needed legislation. And check for introduced bills at www.hsus.org/pnbo.

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Those rescued went to Jackson, Mississippi, where the HSUS logistical team worked to place them with humane societies around the country.

Meanwhile, The HSUS, in concert with animal protection groups throughout the country, were heading to Gonzales, Louisiana, Lamar Dixon Expo Center to work with the Louisiana SPCA in its efforts to rescue countless thousands of animals stranded in New Orleans. PNBOs Bob Reder and Inga Gibson were deployed to this facility and to Louisiana State University to help set up and manage two shelters housing 2,500 animals.

Phones began ringing at The HSUS almost as soon as Katrina struck. The HSUS moved quickly to set up a dedicated Disaster Call Center at its headquarters in the nation’s capital, and dozens of staff members suspected there were literally thousands of phone calls and e-mails from around the country—many from people seeking urgent assistance as they tried to locate, recover, or keep their animals in the midst of the disaster.

On their first foray into the embattled city of New Orleans on September 4, members of the PNBO DART group traveled with animal control staff from the Louisiana SPCA to targeted animals stranded at the Superdome as their priority. There, they rescued dozens of animals relinquished or abandoned by evacuees who fled the city to escape Katrina’s rage.

The HSUS is helping place evacuated animals into adoption programs in Texas and other states. Working with local humane groups, rescues saved more than 6,000 animals in the bayous and Gulf Coast:

“The total number of animals lost to the storm will be difficult to detect for months,” said Laura Bevan, director of HSUS Southeast Regional Office and head of the Mississippi rescue effort. “Tens of thousands of people and animals are still waiting for assistance. This is going to require a massive, long-term effort,” she said.

Get Ready for the Next Disaster

With Mount St. Helens smoldering, the Cascade fault line shifting, the potential for a Puget Sound tsunami threatening, and a region-wide drought raising the risk of forest and wild fires, we all need to be prepared for disaster. Sadly, animals are often the forgotten victims of such disasters, and most emergency shelters for people do not allow animals or provide for their care.

To prepare the region, PNBO presented emergency animal sheltering training, endorsed by the Federal Emergency Management Agency. The training included a mock disaster scenario and brought more than 70 participants from the fields of disaster response, public safety, law enforcement, and animal care and control.

In addition to professional training opportunities, The HSUS disaster services department works with local government responders, humane associations and shelters, and disaster volunteers. A network of trained and equipped volunteers available for nationwide response supports the program.

The HSUS also has information to help you plan for the needs of your animals before any disaster. Contact our office for more information, or visit www.hsus.org/disaster.

Please contact your representative and voice your support for this much needed legislation. And check for introduced bills at www.hsus.org/pnbo.

PNBO Director Robert Reder and HSUS lobbyist Jennifer Hillman (right) were present for Gov. Christine Gregoire’s signing of Washington’s felony animal fighting law.

To support The HSUS’s animal protection efforts, go to www.hsus.org/join.

PNBO’s Inga Gibson (center) works with participants in an emergency animal sheltering exercise.
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