A Team Effort
The Veterinary Community from Around the State Comes Together in a Time of Crisis

On the evening of Saturday, May 23, 2015, rain pounded down on the Texas Hill Country, causing flooding that damaged more than 1,000 houses and killed 24 people and countless animals, with two children still missing at press time. By the following morning, the Texas A&M University Veterinary Emergency Team (VET) had already deployed to the town of Wimberley, where much of the destruction occurred.

“We have our deployment orders, we have our location, and we go set up our base of operation,” said VET Director Wesley T. Bissett, DVM, PhD. “If you remember M*A*S*H on TV, that’s basically what we set up.”

VET was formed in 2010 at the request of the Texas Animal Health Commission (TAHC) after it became evident in the wake of Hurricane Ike that the state needed a deployable emergency team dedicated to veterinary medicine.

“With these families that have lost everything or almost everything, to be able to give them back their animals is so critically important to the family and to the animal,” Dr. Bissett said. “I do believe that’s such an extraordinary part of recovery.”

While in Wimberley, much of VET’s efforts centered on administering extensive veterinary care to the search-and-rescue dogs of Texas Task Force 1. This veterinary work began as early as 4:30 a.m. and continued well into the night to ensure the dogs would be able to continue searching through miles of debris piles each day.

“The piles were people’s things—cars and houses and everything else that was found in that river,” said Debra L. Zoran, DVM, PhD, DACVIM-SAIM, who works as VET’s medical operations officer. “The way the dogs were starting to have issues on day two and day three, I don’t think there’s any chance they would’ve been able to continue to work without us being there to support them.”

In addition to caring for the dogs of the search-and-rescue team, VET also offered support to the local veterinary community.

“Too many times in disasters, the jurisdiction steps up to the veterinary medical profession for help,” Dr. Bissett said. “They expect veterinarians to take all comers and do it all at their own expense. So if we can be that intermediary, that allows the veterinarian to define more or less what they can and will take on.”

Upon discovering via Facebook that VET had arrived in Wimberley, J. Todd Henry, DVM, of Cypress Creek Animal Hospital became one of the first local veterinarians to reach out to the team.

“As soon as we found out they were here, we went over there to introduce ourselves and to let them know, ‘Hey, we’re here in whatever capacity we can serve to help y’all,’” Dr. Henry said. “I went and checked in with them each day, just to make sure things were going okay.”

After a storm that caused so much destruction and loss, Dr. Henry was surprised by the calm that followed.

“When we came back the day after Memorial Day, I was just expecting it to be total chaos,” Dr. Henry said. “It was really pretty calm, and most of the week it was fairly calm. There was an outpouring of help that really did help avoid the chaos after the disaster. Our local shelter group, WAG [Wimberley Adoption Group and Rescue], set up tents and were keeping dogs in crates and things, helping folks who were out of their homes and couldn’t take their pets to the human shelters that were in place.”

Support also arrived from an unexpected—but familiar—source.

“For a lot of these people who lost their homes, their heartworm preventatives and flea medicines washed right down the river with their houses,” Dr. Henry said. “The drug companies—Merial and Zoetis—were very helpful about saying, ‘If people come in with lost medications, we’ll replace them.’ That was something that didn’t even cross my mind.”

Sadly, Zoetis representative Michelle
Carey-Charba was among those who died in the Wimberley flooding. In tribute to their fallen colleague, the Coastal Bend Veterinary Medical Association gathered supplies and monetary donations for WAG. So many donations were collected that once the adoption group could not store any more supplies, the rest were donated to adoption nonprofit Austin Pets Alive.

“It just takes one storm, one car accident, one moment, and everything can change,” said Brigette Tarpley, office manager of Corpus Christi’s VCA Oso Creek Animal Hospital and Emergency Center, which served as the collection center for the donation drive in Carey-Charba’s memory. “You hope that if you’re in a similar situation that someone would want to help you as well.”

Even in the face of devastation and loss, the Wimberley flooding demonstrated the dedication the veterinary community has to animals, the people who love them and their peers and colleagues.

“Veterinarians in general definitely didn’t get into veterinary medicine for the money as much as for the compassion and the caring for animals,” Dr. Henry said. “I think it’s just that compassion we have for what we do. It’s what makes veterinarians and their staffs different.”

No stranger to witnessing tragedy born from disaster, VET’s Dr. Bissett is proud to do his disaster relief work in the name of the veterinary profession.

“We’re just wired to jump in and help,” Dr. Bissett said. “Interacting with the veterinarians in Wimberley and Hays County and Caldwell County just makes me even prouder to be part of this community of veterinary medicine.”

Clockwise from left: Veterinary student Brittany Branick working on medical records, Dr. Brandon Dominguez and other VET members working on a resident animal, Mary Lehman and Jetta getting rehabilitative treatment in field from VET members, veterinary technician D’Lisa Whaley with resident cat, Blanco River devastation

Are You Prepared?
If a natural disaster were to strike your area, would you know how to respond? For more information on disaster preparedness, visit www.txdps.state.tx.us/dem. To learn more about the Texas A&M University Veterinary Emergency Team (VET), visit http://vetmed.tamu.edu/vet. VET offers disaster response templates and preparedness planning for veterinary practices, local jurisdictions and individuals. To make a planning request, visit http://vetmed.tamu.edu/vet/outreach/request-form.