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Dog-save afternoon: Large-animal rescue training in Glen Ellen

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In 2005, the nation's attention was riveted by the devastation of hurricane Katrina. It is estimated that 600,000 animals perished in the storm. And of the 1,833 human casualties, it's estimated that 44 percent perished because they refused to leave their pets, according to veterinarian and animal rescue trainer Rebecca McConnico of Louisiana Tech University. Since then, wildfires in the West have joined hurricanes in their frequency and intensity.



Local first responders receive hands-on training in large animal rescue at Atwood Branch in Glen Ellen on Saturday, April 10, 2021. Photos by Melania Mahoney.

Animal disaster responders from throughout California gathered at the Atwood Ranch in Glen Ellen last week to hear from McConnico and to take part in several days of hands-on training, courtesy of founder Julie Atwood's Halter Project, which sponsored the event and provided full scholarships for the more than 60 attendees.

Participants included volunteer animal disaster responders, sheriff search and rescue (SAR), mounted officers, animal control officers, veterinarians, UC Davis vet students, firefighters and members of the state National Guard 26th Cavalry Division.

Members of the Sonoma Valley Fire District also participated.

"Prior to the course the only animal I'd ever decontaminated was my dog," said Captain Gary Johnson, referring to "decontamination," a cleaning process in animal rescue. "The decon course gave me and other firefighters the opportunity to work with horses, cattle and ruminants. It was a valuable experience."

The Atwood Ranch barn, with swallows flitting overhead, provided atmosphere and a classroom with COVID safe distancing. Pastures, an arena and large pond afforded sites for hands-on work with cattle, sheep, goats and horses brought in from local farms and ranches.

"The classes offered specialized and unique training not available elsewhere in Northern California," says Atwood. "On completion of each course, students receive certifications that meet FEMA job descriptions for various levels

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of animal rescue work.”

The instructors from Code 3 Associates in Colorado arrived in an 82-foot long vehicle dubbed the Big Animal Rescue Truck (BART). Fully loaded with rescue equipment, the mobile command unit functions for three to four weeks in a zero-resource disaster environment. The instructors, with 40 years of combined experience, have been active in rescue work in some of the nation’s most devastating disasters. Courses focused on hazardous materials and animal decontamination, animal behavior in stress situations, disaster transport safety and FEMA swift water and flood animal rescue.

Garret Leonard, a Code 3 instructor, assisted at a large animal shelter housing over several hundred animals during the North Complex fire. “It was quite the menagerie — pigs, chickens, goats, donkeys, horses, llamas,” Leonard says. The animals were exposed to smoke, ash and toxins covering their skin and coats. Animals groom themselves, and each other. They can ingest toxins exposing their owners when they are brought back home. Though OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) and the Department of Homeland Security have requirements that address animal decontamination, they’re often ignored.

Following his North Complex experience, and based on discussions with veterinarians, Leonard, along with Code 3 colleague Brett Huff, formed Animal Decon. The company trains responders in animal decontamination work, or “decon,” and develops specialized equipment for decontamination purposes.

At Atwood Ranch, Animal Decon rolled out a prototype Mobile Livestock Decontamination System, a 21-foot-long chute that expands and contracts to accommodate different size animals. “The design concept was to come up with a system that would be mobile, low stress for animals and safe for handlers,” Leonard said. During the training, sheep, goats, horses and cattle calmly passed through the apparatus, a few at time. Water showered from above and below, while students working between the sidebars, scrubbed the animal’s coats.

Leonard passed around a material called FiberTect, manufactured by First Line Technology. The contaminate wipes were developed several years ago by a scientist at Texas Tech University for military use. “FiberTect can be an integral part of any animal decontamination treatment,” Leonard said. “It’s absorbent and neutralizes contaminants. The dry wipe is especially useful in field situations where there’s no water. FiberTect is a game changer.”

Volunteer Steve Wetherbee participated in the decon, animal behavior awareness and transportation safety courses. His day job is as an operating room nurse with Sutter Health. The Camp Fire triggered his interest in animal rescue.

“My wife organized a drive to gather supplies,” Wetherbee said. “I drove to Chico Airport, the logistical staging area and emergency animal shelter with a truckload of dog and cat food. I stayed on for four days to help. North Valley Animal Disaster Group (NVADG) offered me the opportunity to become a volunteer and sponsor my training.”

Wetherbee has never looked back. He’s participated in over 35 rescue training courses. And he volunteers with NVADG, Sonoma, Napa and Solano Community Animal Response Teams (CARTS.) These all-volunteer CARTS, working alongside first responders, provide animal rescue assistance. “Animals are like family,” Wetherbee said. “I want to be able to get animals out when their owners can’t.”

The last class in the eight-day series, a FEMA swift water and flood animal rescue, took place in a large pond on the ranch. Instructor Brett Huff’s dogs - Gunnar, a 115-pound Doberman, and Leo, a 15-pound dachshund - participated.

“Over the past three years they’ve been ‘rescued’ by thousands of firemen,” Huff said. “They love the attention.”

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Lying on a boogie board, Leo, in a life vest, simulated a dog drifting on debris, while Gunnar stood on a floating dock, like a dog stranded on a porch surrounded by water, a scene all too familiar in floods.

Course participants, all swift-water rescue specialists with Northern California Fire or SAR teams, donned their high-visibility water rescue gear. They manned boats, or waded out probing for hidden underwater hazards. The dogs, accustomed to the drill, cooperated in the rescues, unlike animals scared and stressed in an actual flood situation.

“The Halter Project sponsors responder training and provides scholarships to students because we recognize the need for more animal rescue resources,” said Atwood. “Students often ask, ‘how can I thank you?’ I tell them to encourage others to become informed volunteers, to share the resources available on our website, and be an ambassador for animal disaster preparedness in your community.”