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Natural Disasters: Considerations for Animals in Agriculture

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As our climate continues to change, its effects on vulnerable populations are particularly harrowing. Many of us have seen photographs of polar bears stranded on small ice floes or have read about penguins facing starvation as ocean waters warm. But there is one class of animals that has yet to receive significant attention: farmed animals.

Currently, in the United States alone, nine billion animals are raised and killed for food every year. Ninety-nine percent are kept in concentrated animal feeding operations. These industrial facilities, colloquially known as factory farms, raise thousands of pigs, chickens, turkeys, cows, and other animals in intensive confinement and crowded conditions. A typical chicken factory farm, for example, may have 200,000 birds.

Consequently, the increase in the number and severity of hurricanes and other natural disasters presents a real agricultural challenge. While residents anticipating a major hurricane or flood may be able to grab their companion animals and drive to safety, rescuing tens of thousands of animals from a factory farm is not feasible. The result is animal deaths in the millions.

Death Toll of Farmed Animals

In September 1999, Hurricane Floyd hit the United States, bringing torrential rains, deaths, and devastation. North Carolina, where Hurricane Dennis had made landfall just days prior, bore the brunt of the damage. The double impact of the hurricanes caused excessive flooding, and many rivers set new flood records. As farmers fled to safety, many opened their factory farm shed doors to give their animals a possible chance of survival. Flood waters were so high that in many places the factory farm infrastructure was completely submerged. Some photographs of Hurricane Floyd show pigs perched on the roofs of their massive sheds trying to find higher ground. Many more aerial pictures, however, show waters littered with pink dots—floating pig corpses. In total, 21,000 pigs and one million chickens and turkeys perished during the hurricane.

The exact number of farmed animals killed in natural disasters since Floyd is not known. In 2000, a tornado destroyed 500,000 egg-laying hens trapped in cages in Ohio, while Hurricane Katrina wiped out three million chickens raised for meat at a single farm. No official estimates exist of the damage done by Hurricane Harvey in Texas in 2017, but the number of farmed animals killed is likely in the thousands.

North Carolina, the second largest pork producing state and one of the biggest poultry producers in the country, has seen its share of disasters. In 2016, Hurricane Matthew caused the deaths of 1.8 million chickens and 2,800 pigs. But these numbers were dwarfed by Hurricane Florence in September 2018. Considered a 1,000-year event, Hurricane Florence wreaked havoc on the North Carolina coast, leading to significant flooding and infrastructural damage. As the storm raged, rivers and streams overflowed, and waters completely submerged many roads. Florence caused the deaths of 59 people and over \$24 billion in damage. The North Carolina Pork Council issued a

statement that farmers were working to move animals to higher ground. But when we're talking about millions of animals, due to the nature of the factory farming system, the rescue of all animals in peril was an impossible feat. All in all, 4.1 million chickens and turkeys, 5,500 pigs, and countless fish perished.

Disaster Relief for Affected Communities

Federal and state governments have developed programs to provide emergency and disaster relief to affected communities. North Carolina, for example, created the Swine Floodplain Buyout Program in an effort to help minimize environmental and public health risks caused by natural disasters in 1999 after the devastation of Hurricane Floyd. The state spent \$18 million to buy out pig farms located in the floodplain. Funding for the buyout program originated with the state's Clean Water Management Trust Fund. After the funds were depleted, and following the damage caused by subsequent hurricanes and tropical storms, the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services partnered with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service to continue the buyout program. Although critics of the program argue that it does little to protect farmed animals, the program has managed to acquire 43 factory farming pig operations since its inception—43 farms where animals were once at risk. The number of pigs drowned during the recent Hurricane Florence, admittedly, is 5,500 compared to the 21,000 killed by Floyd.

On the federal level, several programs exist to compensate meat producers during natural disasters, including the Livestock Indemnity Program (LIP). Created by the 2008 Farm Bill and administered by the USDA, LIP aims to provide benefits to eligible animal farmers and contract growers who lose animals under certain eligible conditions. Natural disasters fall within the USDA's definition of eligible loss. LIP reimburses farmers a fixed amount (75 percent of market value) per animal lost or killed. This program, perhaps, helps to explain why virtually no pigs or chickens seeking higher ground were documented after Hurricane Florence. LIP incentivizes keeping the factory farm shed doors locked so that drowned animals can be counted more easily. It incentivizes continuing to direct tax-payer money at a system that already is poorly equipped to deal with calamity.

Legal Protections for Farmed Animals

Another area where farmed animals have been overlooked, especially when compared to companion animals, is legal protection. Congressional action in the aftermath of natural disasters

noticeably varies when it comes to determining outcomes for companion animals and commodity farmed animals. When Hurricane Katrina devastated the coasts of Florida and Louisiana in 2005, thousands of people were forced to leave their cats and dogs behind while evacuating their homes. Some people chose to stay behind with their companion animals, knowingly putting themselves in grave danger. Still, an estimated 600,000 companion animals died or were left behind during the storm. As a direct result of massive public outcry and significant media coverage, Congress enacted the Pets Evacuation and Transportation Standards (PETS) Act in 2006.

Under the PETS Act, states, cities, and counties must “account for the needs of individuals with household pets and service animals before, during, and following a major disaster or emergency” if they are to receive funding for their disaster relief plans. 42 U.S.C.A. § 5196b(g). Today, more than 30 states have enacted laws that deal with disaster planning for companion animals. Many of these laws focus specifically on sheltering animals and the implementation of state animal response teams. North Carolina’s Emergency Operations Plan provides that emergency response teams, in connection with county animal control and animal response teams, will work to support evacuation sheltering operations. The enactment of local, state, and federal laws relating to natural disasters contrasts strikingly with actions taken to protect animals in agriculture.

As hurricanes and other natural disasters continue to become more prevalent, the billions of farmed animals raised and killed for food each year remain in jeopardy. Yet factory farming is on the rise. To truly provide aid, we need laws that protect farmed animals and reverse the incentives so that their rescue from disasters is not only encouraged, but possible.

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