

July 16, 2009

Dear Ms. Sheets:

I am writing on behalf of the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), established in 1863 and the largest veterinary medical association in the world. As a not-for-profit association established to advance the science and art of veterinary medicine, AVMA is the recognized national voice for the veterinary profession. The association's more than 78,000 members represent approximately 86% of US veterinarians, all of whom are involved in a myriad of areas of veterinary medical practice, including private, corporate, academic, industrial, governmental, military, and public health services.

I am writing to inform you of the passage by the AVMA Executive Board of a new AVMA policy titled "Animal Carcass Risk in Natural Disasters":

Animal Carcass Risk in Natural Disasters

Consistent with current scientific literature and the conclusions of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), the AVMA recognizes that animals who die from injuries, including massive animal deaths in cases of natural disasters, generally do not represent a health hazard for humans. The presence of dead bodies that result from a disaster, without the presence of another risk factor, is not the cause for the spread of infectious diseases. (¹PAHO Manual, Ch 3, Conclusions; p. 81)

A persistent myth of disaster response management is that animal carcasses constitute an urgent public health threat in and of themselves. The prevalence of this ongoing myth as well as the confusion among authorities when addressing the issue of handling animal carcasses has been highlighted following recent natural disasters in the Southern United States. An accurate understanding of the human health risk posed by animal carcasses is therefore essential to practical and prompt removal and disposal of the carcasses by an appropriate agency. Inaccurate determinations can and have lead to inappropriate resource assignment, prioritization, and coordination, often in the face of limited resources.

The belief that animal carcasses constitute an urgent public health threat is not supported by current scientific knowledge and is, in fact, refuted by it. The Pan American Health Organization's Manual on Management of Dead Bodies in Disaster Situations is considered to be the definitive resource document on this subject by the world public health community, including the World Health Organization and US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Chapter 3 addresses Health Considerations in Cases of Mass Fatalities (including animal carcasses) and states that "...animal corpses constitute a public health hazard only in specific conditions." Furthermore:

- "An animal that has lived through its life cycle or has died from injuries does not represent any health hazard for humans. Massive animal deaths in cases of natural disasters are not a health hazard for humans, either."
- "...most zoonotic infections do not survive in the dead body of an animal."
- "There exist two specific situations in which the animal bodies can be a risk for humans:
 - the presence of specific infectious agents and
 - the contamination of water by feces and discharge from lesions."
- "The microorganisms of greatest concern are *Cryptosporidia*, *Campylobacter*, and *Listeria*, but only when the bodies are in the water. These microorganisms do not survive for long if the animal is on dry land."
- "As a final analysis, we can state that the dead bodies of animals represent little or no threat for public health. A series of coexisting factors must be present for the animal bodies to constitute a risk for humans. First, the animal should be infected with a disease that can be transmitted to humans. Second, the germ should be able to survive the death of the host. Third, the environment should facilitate the spread of the infectious agent...any interruption in this chain of events results in there being a minimal public health hazard."

Through passage of this new policy, the AVMA supports the world public health community's position in this matter.

The issue of determination of animal carcasses in natural disasters is only one of many under study by animal disease specialists, environmental experts, public health agencies, and others in an attempt to create and to standardize, as much as possible, accepted policies related to the broader scope of carcass disposition.

Should you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact Dr. Heather Case (hcase@avma.org or 800-248-2862 ext. 6632).

Respectfully,

Charlotte A. Krugler, DVM
Chair, Committee on Disaster and Emergency Issues

HC/tmo