

“Vet-Evac-ing.” Saving lives by moving animals to where they can find homes

Megan Prendergast¹, Robert Dixon¹, Mark Lawrie², Louise Kiddell³ and Magdolne Croker³.

¹Faculty of Veterinary Science, University of Sydney, ² Australian Veterinary Association (formerly RSPCA NSW), ³RSPCA NSW.

Email: mlawrie@ava.com.au

Introduction

Moving excess animals from overpopulated rural shelters to urban shelters where there is a deficit of young, sought after puppies and kittens is a proven method of decreasing euthanasia rates in rural shelters. Animal rescue transportation is most effective and safe when performed in a regulated manner by staff following protocols which include veterinary attention and quarantine for animals. If not performed properly, rescue missions can have disastrous consequences for both the people and the animals involved.

Increasing animal rights activism within the community has led to a higher incidence of unregulated and extreme animal rescue attempts. Rescue missions involving long distance travel by car, truck and even by air are becoming commonplace in the United States, in order to save animals from being euthanased. Rescues are often organised by volunteers with few or no protocols, or infrastructure for veterinary treatment and quarantine. This type of activity is also a biosecurity hazard which often leads to disease outbreaks and increased animal suffering.

Extreme rescue group numbers and their operations are on the increase. In America, a number of emergency animal transport and rescue groups are on the internet (see Appendix I). Tremendous amounts of time, effort and resources are devoted to saving animals, transporting animals that will not be able to be sustainably fostered to dedicated carers or even just to move animals to more suitable environments. Also, rescue operations are not limited to tame, domestic species- feral dogs, cats, pigs and livestock are also transported. Extreme rescue missions where animals are removed from war zones in foreign countries are also occurring.

Well-controlled and carried out animal transportation between shelters can be beneficial for all parties involved. It reduces stress on overburdened shelters, supplies animals to larger markets and gives many animals a second chance for survival. However, there are a number of concerns associated with poorly regulated and run operations.

First, volunteers who run the transport operations put themselves at personal risk by travelling long distances with animals. These risks are heightened when volunteers travel alone and when they are transporting violent, aggressive or feral animals. There may also be occupational health and safety, legal and insurance issues associated with such transport. Long distance transport without proper breaks for food, water and exercise also compromises animal welfare and may cause further stress and anxiety.

Another major issue that arises with poorly regulated animal transport is biosecurity.

While it is evident that dogs being transported into Australia represent specific biosecurity risks, there are attendant risks as well for a number of diseases that could affect local dog populations or be potential zoonoses. These diseases could include canine babesiosis, leishmaniasis, and anaplasmosis. Infections such as salmonellosis that may be induced through poor conditions and stress have potential to affect humans resulting in clinical disease for the latter.

Hydatid disease is increasing in rural Australia and dogs from these regions could well infect humans. Canine heartworm could be introduced into a previously naïve area. These possible scenarios further reinforce the need for health checks of animals with preventative and/or therapeutic interventions.

If animals do not receive appropriate veterinary attention including vaccination, medical treatment and quarantine for sick animals, then the risk of spreading infectious disease is high. Parvovirus outbreaks are commonly associated with transport of shelter animals and the introduction of new animals.

Volunteer transporters, foster carers and potential adopters must be thoroughly screened and preferably interviewed to ascertain their character and ability to look after rescued animals.

Transport of puppies and kittens from rural shelters with excess animals to urban areas is a proven method of decreasing euthanasia rates in animal shelters. Rural shelters often have large numbers of animals but an insufficient number of purchasers, whereas the market for puppies and kittens in urban areas is strong but there are not enough animals for supply.

This paper presents data from both rural shelters and the city shelter to demonstrate supply of and outcomes for animals transported to the city for adoption. It reinforces the value of this practice but raises questions about the demand and outcomes for younger animals.

The situation in rural NSW

There are large differences between rural and city shelter populations in NSW, and the outcomes for these animals. A survey of local government run pound facilities in NSW (Department of Local Government (NSW), 2002) found that regions varied considerably in the extent of the regional unwanted dog problem. Rural regions tended to admit more stray dogs per thousand human population than the state average and Sydney regions admitting the least. The lowest rates of reclamation of dogs by owners were observed in the Western (13%) and North-Western (15%) rural regions compared to the state average of 25% of dogs reclaimed, and the highest euthanasia rates were in rural regions (up to 79% in the Western region, compared to 0.3% in Sydney North).

Not only is the fate of dogs different between rural and city shelters, but also the types of dogs. In recent years, multiple studies have shown that shelter dogs in the USA and Australia tend to be over 2 years old (DiGiacomo et al., 1998; Patronek et al., 1996; Prendergast and Dixon, unpublished). Marston et al (2004) found that only 10% of admissions to 3 Melbourne shelters were pups (<6 months). However, research supports that there is a high demand for younger animals (eg Normando et al., 2006) and that younger animals are more likely to pass behaviour tests for adoption (Bollen and Horowitz 2008). Anecdotal evidence from shelters concur that there is strong demand for adoption of puppies and kittens.

By contrast, a study in 2007 of 3 rural pounds in NSW (Prendergast and Dixon, unpublished) found that 28% (680) were pups ≤6 months and 72% were adults of those admitted in 2006-2007. These puppies had significantly reduced odds of being reclaimed by their owner compared to adult dogs.

Similarly, a study of surrenders in one large rural pound showed one fifth of relinquished dogs was under 6 months old. This demonstrated that there was a strong supply of puppies which could be rehomed in regions with a greater adoption demand.

One significant consideration for such a puppy relocation program is whether these rural puppies are desirable to a city adopter, and whether they are suitable pets for a city or suburban home. It was noted in rural pounds that certain breed types contributed disproportionately to pup admissions (Figure 1). The subjective breed assessment classified dogs into 11 distinct 'Breed types' based on the Australian Kennel Council classifications, the breed's appearance and common uses. The breed types most highly represented among pup admissions were Australian Working Dog (43%), 'Unknown Crossbreed' (16%), Mastiff-like types (16%), Bull terrier types (6%) and Fox terrier types' (6%).

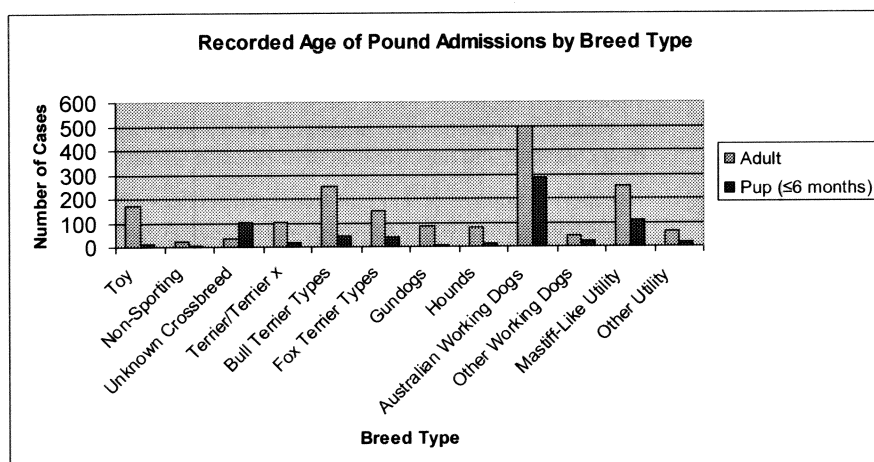


Figure 1: Breed type and stage of life (pup or adult) of dogs admitted to Bathurst, Bourke and Dubbo pounds over the period of 2006-2007 (n=2439)

An important consideration for shelters promoting the adoption of any dogs is the dog's suitability to match the adopter's lifestyle. For example, there is the potential for behaviour problems and an unsuccessful owner-dog relationship if a highly active Kelpie or Cattle dog pup is adopted and receives inadequate exercise or stimulation in a suburban backyard.

Transporting dogs from rural NSW to Sydney

Transporting and rehoming these unwanted rural animals, however, would provide substantial benefit to animal welfare through reducing euthanasia numbers. One of the three rural shelters studied is managed by the RSPCA, and often transports adoptable animals to the Sydney-based shelter because of low demand in the rural region. A comparison of outcomes for admitted dogs from the 3 shelters is in Table 1.

Table 1: Known outcomes for dogs admitted to pounds in Bathurst, Bourke and Dubbo by location (n=2275)

Location	Euthanased	Reclaimed	Sold/ Transferred for Sale	Stolen	Died in Pound	TOTAL					
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
Pound 1	504	69	189	26	37	5	2	0.3	0	0	732
Pound 2	305	90	20	6	1	0.2	3	0.9	9	2.7	338
Dubbo	528	44	351	29	319	26	4	0.3	3	0.2	1205
TOTAL	1337	59	560	25	357	16	9	0.4	12	0.5	2275

The euthanasia rate at the RSPCA's Dubbo shelter was 44% of admissions, substantially less than the 69% and 90% at other shelters. At Dubbo 26% of admissions were sold or transported to city shelters for sale, which accounts for the reduced euthanasia rate.

Outcomes of transferring dogs from rural NSW to the Sydney shelter

There is an increased demand for adoptions. In 2006-07 the number of dogs euthanased due to lack of space at the Sydney shelter was halved. (Lawrie and Awad, 2007). This may be due to both more kennel space and reduction of unwanted dogs being presented to the Sydney shelter. In RSPCA shelters in 2007, 60% of dogs euthanased were for behavioural reasons and 31.5% for veterinary reasons. This low remaining percentile of dogs which are euthanased due to lack of shelter space is reflective of high demand for adoptable dogs. There were 5710 dog adoptions in 06-07, up 16% on the previous year.

RSPCA-managed pounds are successful in reducing euthanasia rates by transferring and rehoming animals. In 2006-07, 5220 pound dogs were signed over to the RSPCA and 50-60% (between 2610 and 3132) of these were rehomed. Perceived benefits are not only the number of additional lives saved but also an increase in the variety of dogs available for adoption in city shelters.

In the 2006-07 financial year the RSPCA NSW also transferred 1222 unclaimed dogs from council pounds not managed by the RSPCA. This number was a large increase on the 92 dogs transferred the previous year. Transfers are attributed to

saving the lives of 1054 dogs (including 653 puppies).

While transferring some adoptable animals which would otherwise be euthanased in rural or regional shelters to the city clearly reduces the euthanasia rate at these shelters, the fate of transported animals needs to be examined to determine any benefits to welfare. In 2006-07 the city shelter received 6484 dogs and 825 (13%) of these were transferred from regional shelters. A University of Sydney study (Prendergast and Dixon, unpublished) examined the fate of some animals transported to the RSPCA Sydney shelter during the two year period from 1/7/2006 to 30/6/2008. A total of 897 dogs were included in the study, and were transported from seven different regional and rural RSPCA shelters. The study included dogs which were admitted as strays, relinquished, adoption returns or shelter offspring. Animals which were transported following humane officer or inspectorate seizure or boarding were excluded. Most dogs were transported from Orange (505), Newcastle (237) and Wollongong (101).

The outcomes for the transported dogs at the city shelter were examined ($n=891$, missing=6). Over 80% of the transported dogs were adopted (Table 2 and Figure 2). Just over half (53.5%) of transported dogs were male, which is reflective of the shelter dog population in Australia and overseas. Over half the transported dogs were medium sized breeds (53.3%), while 28.8% were large breeds and 17.9% were small breeds.

Table 2: The outcomes for dogs transported to the Sydney shelter

Outcome	Frequency	Percent
Adopted	733	82.3
Euthanased	145	16.3
Other	13	1.5
Total	891	100.0

NB: Other includes deaths, stolen and in stock animals

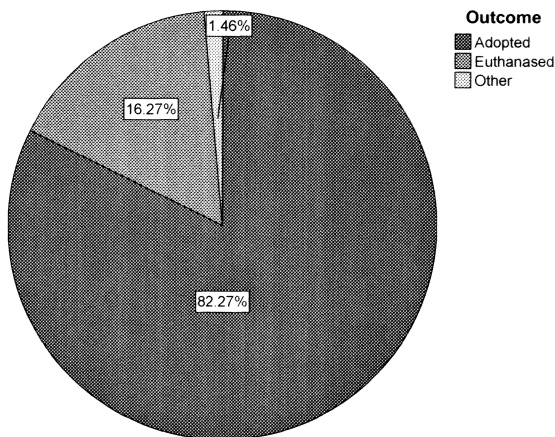


Figure 2: The outcomes for dogs transported to the Sydney shelter

This study also examined dog factors which may be linked to outcome for transported dogs. A linear regression model was applied, and the dog's sex, breed type, age, size and month of transfer were all considered. By backward elimination the only variables found to be significant were breed size and dog age. While one may expect small breeds and puppies to be the most adoptable in the city, but interestingly small breeds had a lower adoption rate (78.5%) than medium (84%) and large breeds (85.5%), and transported puppies had a higher euthanasia rate than dogs over 6 months old. Some of the problems surrounding the behavioural suitability of small dogs (Bollen and Horowitz, 2008) may contribute to the lower adoption rate. Puppies often needed to be euthanased due to disease such as parvovirus infection.

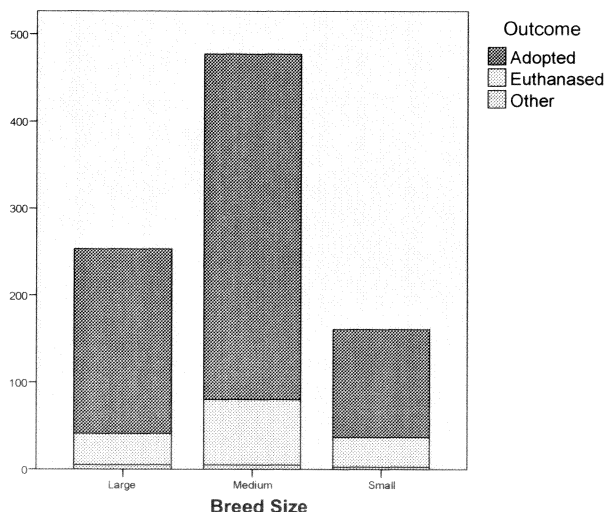
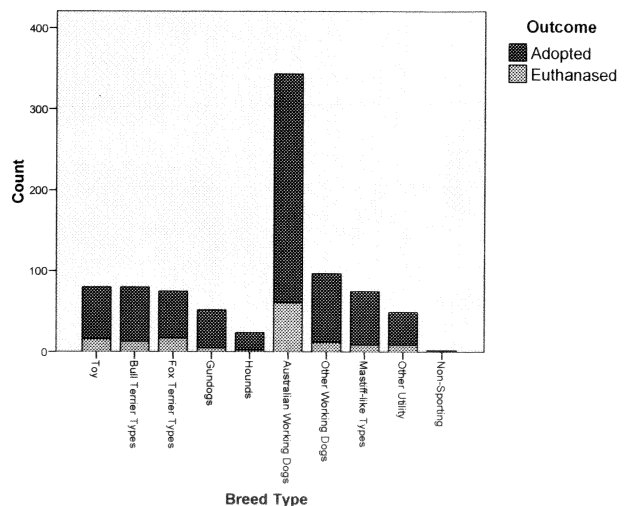
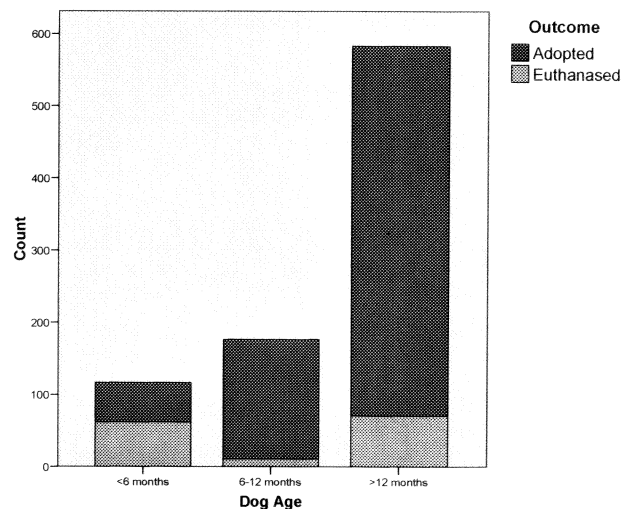


Figure: Outcomes and breed size of dogs transported to the Sydney shelter

By contrast, a Melbourne shelter study Marston et al (2004) found that larger dogs were slower to rehome, while a UK study found that small size dogs were more likely to be rehomed than medium and large breeds. The same study reported that 42.6% of dog admissions to shelters (7656 total) were less than one year of age, and 96% of these dogs were rehomed. (Diesel et al, 2007)

Table 3. Likelihood of Dogs Rehomed in Melbourne

			Outcome		
			Adopted	Euthanased	Total
Dog Age	<6 months	Count	55	62	117
		% within Dog Age	47.0%	53.0%	100.0%
	6-12 months	Count	166	11	177
		% within Dog Age	93.8%	6.2%	100.0%
	>12 months	Count	512	71	583
		% within Dog Age	87.8%	12.2%	100.0%
Total		Count	733	144	877
		% within Dog Age	83.6%	16.4%	100.0%

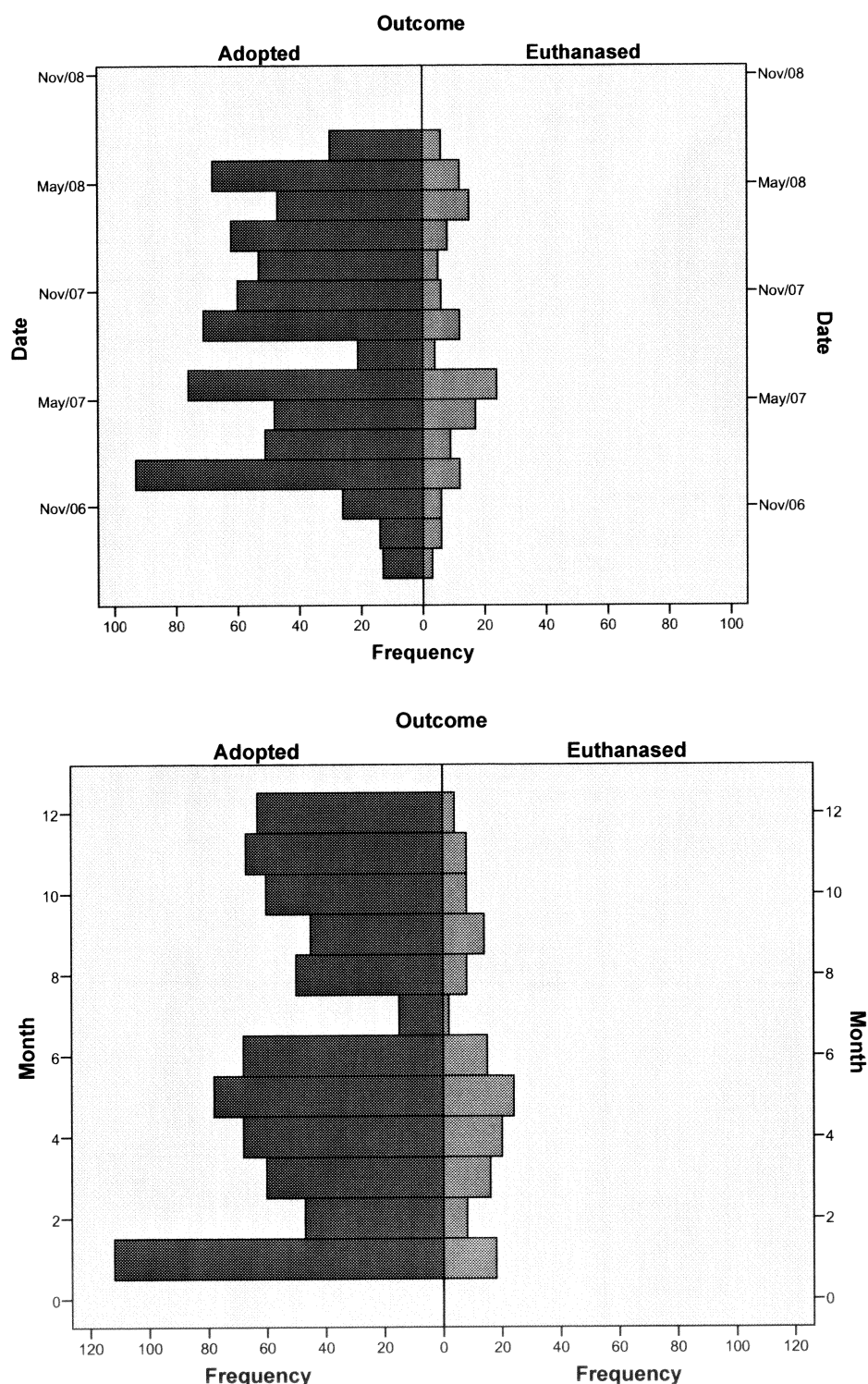


Although significance could not be established, some breed types among transported dogs were more likely to be adopted. The most successful breed types were hounds and gundogs. One study on shelter dogs in the UK found that gundogs and utility breeds were rehomed at the fastest rate. Australian working dogs, bull terrier types and mastiff-like dogs experience the lowest rates of reclamation by their owners in rural NSW pounds and comprise most of the rural unwanted dog population (Prendergast and Dixon, unpublished). However, the adoption rate among these transported breed groups was 80% for bull terrier types, 82% for Australian working dog breeds and 88% for Mastiff-like types, showing they are not necessarily the less popular breeds in the city.

Other studies have found factors that influence whether a dog is adopted or how quickly include age, sex, coat colour, reason for relinquishment and injury status (Lepper et al 2002). Interestingly, several studies have found black and tan coat colour to be unpopular (Wells and Hepper, 1992; Lepper et al 2002; Diesel et al 2007). One study in Ireland found relinquished dogs were more likely to be adopted than stray dogs (Wells and Hepper, 1992).

Finally, the success of the transportation program over time was examined, focusing on the number of dogs adopted and euthanased.

The figure below shows the number of transported dogs over the two year period and the outcomes.



As can be seen, adoptions are highest relative to euthanasias around the summer months of December/January. Fewer dogs were transported during July. In the year 2006-07 a total of 411 stray and surrendered dogs were transported, and 36 of these were aged under 1 year old. Transportations increased the following year where 486 such dogs were transported, and over half of these (263) were less than one year old.

Conclusions

In summary, this analysis of transportation of animals between shelters by the RSPCA NSW demonstrates the potential to rehome animals which would otherwise be euthanased. It satisfies a demand in the city and contributes to choice in selection for adoption. Such choice is one factor that will assist in the establishment of a new dog:human bond that will endure and not see the animal returned to the shelter.

Transporting animals from rural to urban shelters should be considered as a practice to reduce euthanasia rates in rural shelters and increasing adoption rates in urban shelters. We do not want to encourage extreme rescue operations that can impact negatively on animal welfare or pose a biosecurity risk in Australia. It is crucial that training in transportation of animals be undertaken in conjunction with strict protocols and welfare codes of practice. Veterinary checks must be done before animals are sent to the city and then followed immediately by checks on arrival. The American operations should not be used as a model, but ideas could be taken from these systems in order to develop a transport program in Australia.

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- Appendix: List of transport groups found when type in "animal rescue transport" into google:**
- TRUCK-N-PAWS
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/TRUCK-N-PAWS>
This list is for pets in need, especially puppy-mill dogs, to get to their forever homes.
- Pet Transport Net
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/PetTransportNet>
This list is for requesting or volunteering to transport a rescued pet to its new forever home
- Dog Rescue Railroad
http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Dog_Rescue_Railroad
This is a place to post your transportation needs.
- IMOM-xpress
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/IMOM-xpress>
Our main purpose is for the transportation of special needs, older, and/or abused animals, however we will never turn away any animal that needs to get somewhere.
- PacWest-Dog-Cooperative
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/PacWest-Dog-Cooperative> Open to members of all transport/rescue groups, this forum is for dog rescuers to request and coordinate shelter pulls, foster-care, home visits and transport within California, Oregon, Washington and B.C. regions.
- Rescue Transport
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/RescueTransport>
This list is dedicated to the transportation of Rescue animals. It is a resource in the transportation needs of rescue animals.
- NHARescue
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/NHARescue>
The purpose of this group is to help in arranging transport, to provide support for "Animal Angels" who need it in this stressful duty, and to help in finding animals of all sorts a happy loving home or foster home.
- Pet Travel
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/pettravel>
This is a list where you can post if you are trying to set up transportation for an animal.
- CaRescueRR
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/CaRescueRR>
The purpose of this list is to network animal lovers throughout California and neighboring states in an attempt to transport dogs in need to new homes, rescue groups, etc.
Areas covered: CA, OR, WA, BC, ID, NV, UT, AZ
For further information, go to:
<http://members.loop.com/~gmckenzie/CaliforniaRescueRailroad.htm>
- Rolling Rescue
<http://www.geocities.com/Petsburgh/Park/6583/>
Rolling Rescue is a place for rescues needing transport and transport volunteers to find each other. Our mission is to recruit trucks, RVers, commuters, and anyone else who travels to the network to help move rescued animals to safety in a rescue or from a rescue to their new adoptive homes.
- Dalmatian Overland Transport Service Sign-up Form
<http://www.dalrescue.com/dots-signup.html>
- All Breed Rescue
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/allbreedrescue>
This list is to find volunteers to pull dogs from shelters or foster or keep them overnight for transportation and to transport dogs anywhere from to 50 - 100 miles per leg.
- BikerBabeTransport
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/BikerBabeTransport>
This list is for posting requests for transporting rescue dogs to their forever homes or into foster care. It is also for people wanting to help in transporting these dogs.
- DogTransport
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/DogTransport>
This list is for assisting rescues and shelters in finding drivers to take dogs to rescue/forever homes.

RescueAngelsonWheels

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/RescueAngelsonWheels>

We are a group comprised of Rescuers who transport, Transporters who rescue, or Big Hearted Animal Loving volunteers willing to help with both.

Help_Us_Get_Safe

http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Help_Us_Get_Safe

This is a transport group for EMERGENCY needs such as last minute rescue from a dog pound.

Illinois Animal Transporters

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/IllinoisAnimalTransporters> This group's sole intention is to transport rescued animals throughout the state of Illinois from shelters or animal control centers, to foster care or to their forever homes. You do not have to live in Illinois to join.

Rescue Transporters

<http://communities.msn.com/RescueTransporters>

This site records known meeting areas along the highways, both good and bad, including a hotel locator, to help get driving directions and make transports much easier to set up.