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The 2011 Grantham flood disaster and the Lockyer Valley Regional Council Animal Control Team response

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- Located: Approx 1 hrs drive west of Brisbane
- Area: In excess of 2270 square kilometres.
Made up of the former Gatton and Laidley Shire Councils
- Population: Approx 36000 and increasing
- Registered Dogs and Cats: 6300 and increasing
- Animal Control Team: Team Leader
3 x Animal Control Officers
1 x Administration Officer

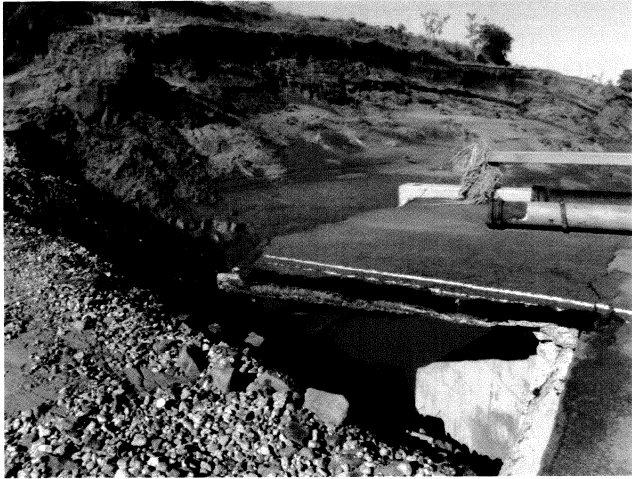


Monday 10 January 2011 was the day that brought Grantham, a small country town in the Lockyer Valley to the attention of people all over the world. It was a day that will long be remembered as a day of sadness and despair by many. It was the day that saw many people die, many homes totally destroyed or damaged beyond repair and the day that many animals were killed, lost or had to be left behind by evacuated owners to an unknown fate. That day and night, the only priority was to save human lives and prevent further loss of life.



The Grantham Rail Bridge that separated the lower flood affected section of the Township from the higher relatively flood free areas.

Due to flooding throughout the Lockyer Valley Regional Council region, Councils own Animal Control Team were unable to get through to work themselves on that Monday or the following day and as such, were restricted to ensuring that their own families and neighbours were safe and accounted for. Access to Councils Pound was also affected for 48 hours due to being isolated by flooded roads and bridges. Luckily only a small number of impounded animals were being held there and had access to automatic water supplies.



Bridge leading to LVRC Pound



Another bridge downstream of the LVRC Pound

A brief timeline of actions

9am Wednesday, 12 January 2011; Darryl Simpson the LVRC Animal Control Team Leader was able to reach the Pound Facility via a longer than usual route due to road closures and ensured that all of the impounded animals were safe, fed, watered and had their pens cleaned.

To complicate matters, the water supply to the Pound had been cut due to flood damage to pipes crossing the Lockyer Creek. At this stage, no other members of the Animal Control Team were able to make it into work.

1015am Wednesday, 12 January 2011; the stark reality of what had happened at Grantham became evident when a telephone call was received by the Team Leader from a resident who had found a dog swimming out of flood waters several kilometres from Grantham. The dog was wearing a registration tag that showed it had belonged to a family that had lived in the small town. The family had been listed

on the Missing Persons List the day before and their house was no longer where it had been. A few days later, it was confirmed that the dog's owners had been killed as a result of the flood waters tearing through their house.

1030am Wednesday, 12 January 2011; a telephone call from Doctor Bob Donnelly, the Head Veterinarian at the University of Queensland Gatton Campus was received by Council, offering whatever assistance that the Gatton Campus Veterinary Clinic could provide. Without hesitation, he approved the immediate transfer of all currently impounded animals to the Clinic and the housing of any and all flood affected animals that came to Councils attention.

11am Wednesday, 12 January 2011; a request from the Queensland Police Grantham Area Site Commander was received asking for assistance in the location, rescue and relocation of flood affected animals from within the Grantham Disaster area. This was due to animals being located by Search Teams on, in, under and near houses and properties being searched.



Four dogs found by Emergency Services on the roof of a House. It is not known how they got there except that their owners did not place them there. All of these dogs were rescued by LVRC and later re-united with their owners.

By 1130am, Councils Animal Control Team Leader was enroute to the area. As he drove along a muddy slippery road previously been a 2 lane wide bitumen road was now reduced to a single set of tyre tracks though mud and silt 12 inches or more deep, the images that had been previously only seen on television became a stark reality. Paddocks that had previously been used to grow vegetables were now filled with cars, boats and houses that appeared to have built in the middle of them. On reaching the beginning of the residential area itself, the vacant spaces where many of these homes had originated from became evident.



A Grantham house and cars in a farm paddock beside the main access road

After liaison with the Police Commander, approval was gained for Councils Animal Control to access the entire flood affected area in Grantham to effect the location, rescue and relocation of flood affected animals. It was stipulated however that only those properties that were showing police tape indicating that they had been initially searched by Emergency Services were to be accessed by Animal Control. So began the "On Ground" Activities of the LVRC Animal Control Team within Grantham.

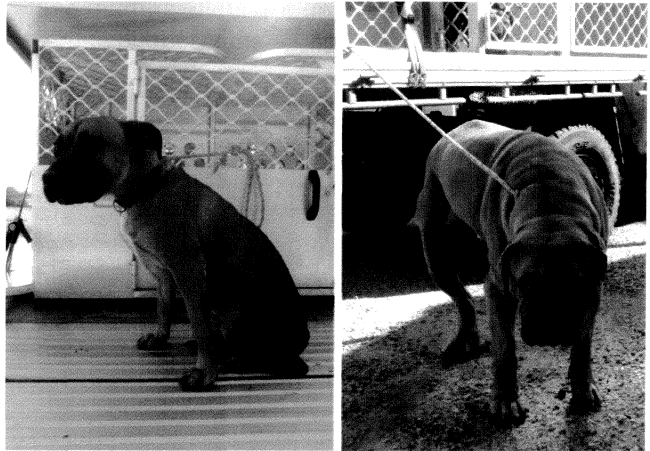


A house being taped to show it had been preliminarily searched

By 230pm, Councils Animal Control Team on the ground within Grantham had doubled with Animal Control Officer Sean Payne being able to make it to work after the dropping of flood waters in his area.

By late that afternoon, the Team had located a number of dogs, of which 5 were able to be taken into care with the others being unable to be caught at this time. A number of deceased animals were located within properties. Many of these animals were still secured either by chains or within pens or enclosures that had been covered by flood waters. As they were found, the bodies were removed from the

properties and placed on the kerbside of the road in front of the houses and were collected soon after for disposal to try and prevent the spread of disease.



First two dogs rescued in Grantham

At close of day, all of the animals taken into care were conveyed to the University of Queensland Gatton Campus Veterinary Clinic, photographed, given a health check, vaccinated and wormed and placed in holding kennels.

Early the next morning, Animal Control Officer Christian Gutt joined the LVRC Animal Control Team working within Grantham after flood waters had receded in his area sufficiently enough to allow him to make it in work.

That day resulted in many properties visited by the Team with over 40 animals taken into care. The Animal Control vehicles resembled mobile menageries with the variety of pet animals including dogs, cats, parrots, doves, quails and 2 x Siamese Fighting Fish located and removed from a number of properties.

It soon became known to residents who had been evacuated earlier that Council had its Animal Control Team in the area and many contacted Council to advise of pets left behind during the evacuation phase or lost during the flood itself. The Team responded to all such calls where possible and were successful in locating many of these animals. In several cases, although the animals themselves were not found, evidence of them being alive was found and so food and water were left for them and these properties were checked on a regular basis until the animals were able to be collected.

Friday 14 January 2011 saw another phase of the efforts by the Animal Control Team commence. They had noticed that a number of residents living within outlying properties surrounding the Grantham area, who although effected by the floods had not been required to be evacuated and as such were

still at their homes. These people had taken into animals belonging to friends in the area and were now needing food supplies for these extra animals. The Team began taking supplies of dog, cat, bird and poultry food with them on the trips to Grantham and visited these properties enroute and resupplied the residents.

Saturday 15 January 2011, following a meeting with LVRC Animal Control, RSPCA Representatives and Bio Security QLD Representatives, a co-ordinated plan of effort was put into operation. Animal Control would still focus on the Grantham area and continue its efforts from the previous days, the RSPCA would focus on dealing with Animal welfare issues located within the Grantham and other flood effected areas such as Murphys Creek, Withcott and Helidon and Bio Security QLD would assist by undertaking road patrols in other areas of the LVRC area in an effort to remove livestock from roads and back into safe areas as well as provide transport for livestock as required. This day also saw Bio Security QLD staff supply needed equipment and erect over 1 km of electric fencing on a single property alone to prevent cattle from straying onto the roadside.



A variety of birds rescued 20 January 2011

The pattern of work by the LVRC Animal Control Team was repeated over the next week with staff working up to 12-14 hour days in the location, rescue and relocation of flood affected animals. Rest days were needed to be scheduled for staff so as to ensure that burnout did not occur and in all cases, staff only took a rest day after their protests were denied.

Officers were required to work on a daily basis in environments that ranged from open spaces, to back yards filled with knee deep mud and large amounts of flood debris to the of inside houses and other buildings that were full of flood debris, mud, overturned furniture and foodstuffs that were beginning to rot.



Interior of a Grantham Flood Affected House.

Officers also found that many animals reacted with high levels of fear aggression on approach and on being handled. As a result, the combination of aggressive animals with the flood affected surroundings made a hazardous tasking even more so. To cap it off, the number of poisonous snakes located in the area was incredibly high.

Not all animals located within the disaster area were able to be evacuated due to a variety of reasons. In some cases dogs and cats were too fearful to be approached by officers and would run off immediately when it became apparent that they had been sighted, poultry including chickens, ducks and geese were found everywhere and it was decided in a discussion with the RSPCA that in most cases that they were best left in place and far easier to ensure that they had access to feed and water. In one particular case, it became a regular sight to see a rooster and 2 hens sitting under a particular house no matter the time of day you visited.



It took 3 days to rescue 2 fearful Chihuahuas from this property. A third was found by the owner a week later hiding amongst flood debris.

The good points

1. The efforts by all those concerned with the process of location, rescue and relocation of flood affected animals and their subsequent care can not be given enough applause and appreciation. From the never tiring efforts of the LVRC Animal Control Team in the field and the office based Administration Officers who were literally buried beneath mountains of paperwork at this time, to the emergency workers in the disaster zone who went out of their way to assist the Team where possible and in some cases "adopted" wandering animals such as poultry and fed and watered them at their assembly areas, to the incredible staff and volunteers at the University of Queensland Gatton Campus Veterinary Clinic and Small Animals Studies Centre who gave all animals brought into them much needed care and attention, to the many people and companies who donated animal foods and other items, I would like to offer my thanks and gratitude for their combined efforts.
2. The large number (and variety) of companies, organisations and individuals who donated incredibly large amounts of animal foods and care products to the region to be used for those animals affected by the floods. Products such as food stuffs, flea /tick products, shampoos, food stuffs, animal treats, bedding and animal equipment were delivered by the truckload. Offers from volunteers to look after animals were also received from all over the country.

The bad points

A small number of occurrences that stand out as the most disappointing aspects of this event and did a great deal of damage to the good efforts of Council's Animal Control Team were:

1. The spread of unsubstantiated claims that Council was going to destroy all animals found within this time-frame after a three day period. The majority of these claims were spread via the use of Facebook and other electronic based media. This then led to many letters, emails and phone calls to Council from concerned people all over Australia and from overseas.
Several newspapers ranging from local papers to interstate publications contacted Council regarding these claims and did in fact publish the facts as provided by Council in response. The facts being that all animals would be kept by Council for an indefinite period, all animals would be receiving the best of veterinarian care and attention, owners once identified would be re-united at no charge with their animals and that if no owners were able to be identified, animals would be offered to rehousing agencies for re-homing.

As it turned out, out of more than 140 animals taken into care during this event, only 1 animal was euthanased and that was on veterinary advice and all others were either re-united with owner or rehoused via a number of Animal Re-Housing organisations.

2. The low number of dogs and cats that were relocated from the Grantham found to be registered and or micro-chipped at the time of the disaster. Out of approximately 90 dogs and cats relocated, only 7 animals were found to be wearing registration tags. No animals that were found within the Grantham area were micro-chipped at that time. It must be noted here, that a Micro-Chip company did provide free micro-chips for all dogs and cats cared for at the University of Queensland Gatton Campus Veterinary Clinic and Small Animals Studies Centre during the flood crisis.

If all of the animals had been registered (and wearing collars and tags) or at least micro-chipped, the task of identifying owners and re-uniting them would have been simplified and at a much faster rate than what occurred.

3. An attempt by an individual to obtain two rescued birds (yellow ringneck parrots) by falsely claiming the birds as theirs. This person who lived outside of the Lockyer Valley Regional Council area had sighted a picture of the birds in a newspaper article and subsequently attended the Gatton Campus Veterinary Clinic and claimed the birds as having lost them during the flood. The UQ Staff member was unable to contact Animal Control Staff and so released the birds to this person. Luckily they obtained a copy of their drivers licence and obtained other contact details.



The 2 yellow parrots at the bottom of the cage were falsely claimed by a non-resident of Grantham

Follow-up of this incident led to the Police contacting the individual and advising them unless the birds were returned, they would investigate the matter and possibly charge them with a number of offences.

Within a few hours, the birds were returned in good order and subsequently re-united with their rightful owners.

Summary

The Grantham Flood Disaster effected many people in huge variety of ways and one of those ways was the effect it had on hundreds of animals owned and kept within that area. Unknown numbers of animals were either killed in the flood itself or washed away to points unknown. Lockyer Valley Regional Council Animal Control Team only dealt with a small portion of those affected animal owners and their animals. Council still receives calls on a regular basis from owners who lost animals on the 10 January 2011 in the hope they will be found.

From an Animal Control Officer perspective, it was a never before experienced challenge that saw the need for years of experience, training and knowledge to be drawn upon each day to ensure a outcome that would benefit ourselves, the animals concerned and above all many traumatised owners. From the viewpoint of the Team Leader and as a member of the team that worked within the Grantham area, the team worked extremely well and met all challenges presented to them but it is something we do not want to experience again.

On a personal note, to be able to be present when an owner, who had lost family members in the flood waters that smashed into Grantham on Monday 10 January 2011, collected a number of pets which had all been located on different dates at different locations within Grantham was an experience I will never forget. Just to be able to instil a small portion of normalcy into his and his surviving family member's lives provided them with a massive uplift at such a sad stage in their lives.



Dog and owner re-united in a time of grief

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