

RSPCA's flood response focuses on animal rescue

When severe weather hit Cumbria in November 2009 and the potential for flash floods was realised, the RSPCA National Water Rescue Technicians (WRT) were mobilised from across England and Wales. RSPCA teams had been on standby for some time before the event due to the persistent rain in the area and the guidance from the Meteorological Office and Environment Agency. RSPCA Water Rescue Technicians were sent to the Cockermouth area, with the RSPCA local coordinators located in Kendal.

The team in Cockermouth immediately began assisting the emergency services with the evacuation taking place, including some transportation of animals to an emergency rest centre.

The RSPCA's main focus was flood response and all water rescue trained officers (over 80 nationally) were advised to consider themselves on standby.

On Friday 20 November five RSPCA teams were deployed across the Cockermouth, Workington and Keswick areas. Flooding was significant and, where possible, the RSPCA assisted emergency services to rescue trapped people. The situation remained very changeable and it was an extremely dangerous working environment.

One of the bigger animal rescues involved the RSPCA rescuing approximately 200 trapped sheep in Workington, south of Calva Bridge. Another involved a trapped person whose dog collapsed and needed to be helped.

The statistics

Incidents received:	44
Animals involved:	250+ (domestic and livestock)
RSPCA operational front line officers deployed	10
Other staff:	15
(Press, National Control Centre, Regional management, Duty Operations Managers)	

There were many others including WRT officers on standby but not eventually deployed and RSPCA regional staff maintained business continuity.



Photo: RigiFlex

There were numerous enquiries from evacuated people at rest centres who had had to leave their pets behind. A farmer contacted the RSPCA for assistance with six cattle and there were three incidents involving 30, 20 and 200 sheep respectively. Other rescues involved a total of eight cats, in separate incidents, and a dog.

Additional teams were sent North, but were held overnight around Warrington as there were also potential flooding issues in Wales due to continuing bad weather.

Emergency calls only

The RSPCA was now on a national crisis response footing. Its National Control Centre was taking emergency calls only and asking callers to help as much as they could by taking animals to vets etc. The RSPCA's main focus was flood response and all water rescue trained officers (over 80 nationally) were advised to consider themselves on standby.

On Saturday 21 November WRIs staffed by North region officers were stood down for a rest and recovery period and to allow them to be available again when needed. Replacement staff, who were staying overnight in Warrington, travelled to Cumbria while available staff were split into four teams: three worked in Cockermouth, one in Workington.

Chief Officer Inspectorate (COI) Tim Wass was on site at Cockermouth with water rescue teams.

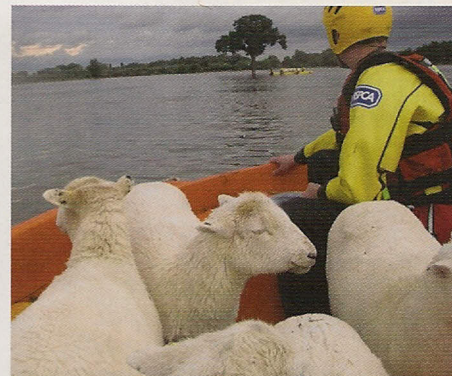


Photo: RigiFlex

Both the team and COI met Gordon Brown who discussed the RSPCA's activities in the area and the PM commended the charity on its rescue efforts.

SKY News and BBC News worked with RSPCA teams in Cockermouth. One team reunited three dogs with their relieved owners and they also reunited a couple in the Sheep and Wool rest centre with their two cats.

By 4:00pm calls about the floods were reducing and most people and animal rescues were complete.

By Sunday 22 November teams had dealt with around 50 incidents regarding animals in need of assistance since the Friday. Overnight and morning torrential rain didn't escalate any issues in Cumbria, Wales or the South West and officers who were far from home were stood down so they could travel. North region rested officers were then called back on duty to travel to Cumbria, to be available first thing Monday morning.

One WRT remained operational in Workington. Replacement teams made up from North region staff gathered at Penrith, and then moved on to Workington to be available first thing Monday morning.

www.rspca.org.uk



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Floods – multi agency training is essential

Water rescue training is focused on dealing with incidents that have a limited geographical extent. It typically concentrates on locating, accessing and rescuing casualties who can easily be identified; it is a relatively well understood discipline that has an established framework for maximising the safety of those involved. Teams are well versed in the systems of work, such as downstream and upstream safety, that should ideally be in place in order to affect a rescue.

Flooding, pushes these commonly accepted principles to the limits. In flood events, such as Cum-

bria 2009, small teams are often found working in flood waters with limited backup, less than ideal equipment, at the end of a long and unreliable communications chain. The scale of the event is such that multi agency working is essential and that can bring its own frustrations. Rescue teams are brought in from outside with little or no local knowledge, so even just manoeuvring around the area can be difficult. There are different systems of work between teams, meaning that it is more difficult to work effectively together. Some teams bring specialist skills or equipment, such as the fire and

rescue service mass decontamination or mountain rescue's experience of working with helicopters, and all of these have to be put together to create an effective search and rescue response.

Cumbria has once again demonstrated that flood search and rescue training needs to build on the water rescue skills, improve inter agency capability, be able to scale up to match the size of the events and support the local communities when they need it most and part of this solution is training together before the skills are really needed.

www.outreachrescue.com