

## Dogs Evacuated Due to Fires Are Safely Returned

**Helen Woodward Animal Center evacuated close to 400 animals in less than four hours.**

Posted: October 27, 2007, 5 a.m. EST

Dogs returning to the HWAC after they were evacuated.

Photo courtesy of the HWAC

Memories of the massive Cedar Fire that hit San Diego County in 2003 were at the forefront of employees' minds at Helen Woodward Animal Center (HWAC) as the wildfires rapidly swept through Southern California this week.

HWAC sits on 12 acres of land in San Diego County and houses close to 400 animals from goats to turtles, and horses to dogs and cats. The nonprofit coordinates adoptions, provides therapy and educational services, as well as boards animals.

"We're right across the street from a fire station," HWAC spokesman John Van Zante said. Van Zante recalled that, during the Cedar Fire, firefighters told HWAC employees that they would try to give them as much warning as possible, but that HWAC may only have 15 minutes to evacuate the animals and employees.

Although they were fortunate enough to be spared from the Cedar Fire, the ordeal brought a renewed recognition for the need to have an up-to-date evacuation plan in place.

The plan that resulted from the Cedar Fire scare was put to use as the staff members and hundreds of animals were forced to flee the property as the flames crept towards HWAC on Monday, Oct. 22.

About 50 employees and a few volunteers began implementing the strategy at around 9:30 a.m., beginning with the smaller animals and then moving on to the dogs and cats, and finally evacuating the horses.

"The last of the horses pulled off the property at about 12:45 p.m.," Van Zante said. "In about three and one half hours we evacuated almost 400 animals."

Based on their planning, locations had already been selected as to where and how the animals would be transported. Larger animals were sent to an employee's home who had a large yard where they were allowed to graze and lounge in the grass. Most of the dogs and cats went home with HWAC employees; some went to a nearby veterinary hospital with extra kennel space. The pets in the boarding facility were driven to nearby animal specialty hospital.

"We were fortunate," Van Zante explained. "We knew what we were doing and we had terrific people here. I talked to one of the doctors yesterday and he said he can't imagine that it could have gone any better. It went like clock-work."

The timely and planned evacuation procedures may have saved lives. When HWAC employees began evacuations, the property was designated a voluntary evacuation area. But within the three and one half hours it took to get all of the animals out, evacuations were deemed mandatory.

On Wednesday, Oct. 24, staff members and animals were allowed to return. None of the animals faced any serious injuries due to the evacuations. However, they are all being monitored for signs of smoke inhalation and breathing problems.

Fortunately, the center was still standing and losses were limited to wind, electrical, and smoke damage. Several structures on the property blew down, a power surge caused problems in the kennel area, and some items will have to be discarded because of the strong smoke smell.

Van Zante said he estimates the short-term loss to the nonprofit at about \$70,000 but adds that long-term losses could be much greater. Van Zante said the center relies on donations to operate, and several of their contributors were affected by the fire as well.

"We've got people who are regular donors who don't have a house today," he said.



Some of the help is coming from Iams. The pet food company donated two truckloads of food that arrived at the center on Friday, Oct. 26. The donated food is enough to feed 6,000 pets for seven days. However, Van Zante said that most of the food will be given to rescue groups and evacuation centers. He added that a shelter in need can contact HWAC and schedule a time to pick up some of the Iams pet food.

"We all reached out to each other," Van Zante said of the ordeal. "We help each other because none of it is about us – it's all about the animals."

For more information about the HWAC, visit [www.animalcenter.org](http://www.animalcenter.org)

-Heidi Hatch, Associate News Editor for DogChannel.com

For more on how the California fires are affecting dogs and their owners in the area, [click here](#).