

HURRICANE RITA: HELP FOR NON-HUMAN EVACUEES

Animals marching two-by-two into the Travis Expo Center

Horses, dogs, cats and a chicken wait out the storm in their temporary digs.

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Ralph Barrera/AMERICAN-STATESMAN

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Pat Enyart, came to the Travis County Exposition Center on her lunch break Friday to help out with these horses from Galveston Island that were relocated before the storm. These horses are used for beach riding on the island.



Ralph Barrera/AMERICAN-STATESMAN

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Koren Mercer tends to Baskair, a stable horse, outside the Travis County show barn as she gives him some exercise Friday after being cooped up in a horse trailer.

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By **John Kelso**

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

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Noah put the animals on the ark to save them from the flood. It's not a two-by-two march, and there are no llamas, monkeys or giraffes. But a similar rescue operation is going on at the Travis County Exposition Center.

Horses being trailered from the Gulf Coast to save them from the wrath of Hurricane Rita are taking up new digs in the exposition center's livestock barn. The horses are coming in from places such as Galveston and Houston.

It's not just horses that have been brought to the center to keep them from getting swamped. "There's a chicken and a rabbit," said Mike Korth, of Manor, a volunteer worker with Lone Star Equine Rescue/Habitat for Horses. "I'm not sure where they are from. We're expecting about six show steers and a show goat. I know last (Thursday) night a couple drove up with 20 dogs."

But if you're looking for something not to step in, mostly it's road apples.

"Probably right now we're right at 175 horses; if we fill up, we're going to have a little over 250," Korth said. "We're a nonprofit organization. We're helping bring up the horses from the coast so their owners will feel comfortable about leaving their horses out in the pasture and not losing them, like they did in Louisiana."

He says the Expo Center is donating the space for the animals.

The critters' travel tales are as harrowing as those of the people stuck in traffic in the Houston exodus. The difference is the animals aren't doing the driving, and they have to let their chauffeurs tell their stories for them.

Korth says the horses are being packed into trailers like sardines in a can because the rescuers know they have to move fast before the highways close. Doubling back might be impossible.

"So, many of these horses are pretty stressed out," Korth said. "I've seen a three-horse trailer that they've brought seven horses in it. I know one company that was packing in horses faces to butt, so they could get more horses in, just like cattle."

Paul Johnson of McDade says he would have run out of diesel fuel on his way back from the coast with a load of beach horses if it hadn't been for a friendly trucker near Columbus. Traffic was inching along. The gauge was edging toward empty. Johnson needed help.

"There was some trucker guy and he said, 'How's the horses?' " Johnson recalled. "And I said, 'The horses are OK, but I'm about to run out of fuel.' So he let me siphon five gallons out of his truck. I don't know his name."

"It was terrible, it was stop-and-go, it was 2 miles an hour, I was in tears," said Debbie Pendleton, who came to the center from her home near Galveston with her 11 horses, 14 cats and seven dogs. "It's going under water there, so I brought up the whole family," she explained.

The horses were driven to Austin. Pendleton, her daughter and her niece, and the dogs and the cats rode in two trucks — the cats in cages and the dogs riding freestyle. Pendleton left home shortly after 6:45 p.m. Wednesday and arrived at the Expo Center on Friday morning after spending part of the night in her truck in Giddings.

The dogs — "a couple beagles, a couple labs, a couple lab mixes, a basset hound," she said — were staying in one stall at the Expo Center. "The cats are in the stall that's getting tarped up," she added. She said she'd stay at the center with her critters.

"I'll be using the shower and the bathroom. I'll be taking care of these guys. I've been trying to get a shower for three hours."

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