

Siberian Husky
October 2002
Fire in the Mountains!

The Hayman fire in the Pike National Forest, Colorado, was on a rampage. In July of this year, 100,000 acres of prime forestland and mountain residential communities burned. Homes were lost, but people are evacuated to safety. Animals were rescued and relocated in animal shelters. Thanks to the Animal Evac Volunteers, which was recently organized by a group of Siberian sled dog drivers, family pets have been safely evacuated.

The genesis for the Animal Evac Volunteers was earlier, during the Snaking and Black Mountain wildfires when the animal control personnel in two mountain counties were unable to rescue all of the animals left behind as families fled the encroaching fires. They lacked manpower and vehicles capable of transporting the great numbers of dogs and cats. Members of the Colorado Mountain Musers and the Rocky Mountain Sled Dog Club were called and they responded with their dog trucks capable of carrying as many as 20 dogs at once. Their time, dog-handling expertise and large vehicles were indispensable. Musers rode with the sheriff's department personnel to rescue the dogs and cats, tag them, identify their home location and transport them to the Table Mountain Animal Shelter where they were cared for until they could be reunited with their families.

As soon as those two fires were out, the counties stated that they wanted a group of volunteers who could respond quickly and effectively when future wildfires occurred. The musers organized as Animal Evac Volunteers and applied for 501C3 non-profit organization status in order to be ready for the wildfire season. They are identified by bright yellow T-shirts with the AEV logo and have magnetic signs posted on the vehicles they use to transport the rescued pets.

Little did the volunteers expect that they would be needed so quickly and over such a vast area. As the Hayman fire spread, many of the volunteers' own kennels were threatened as the fire spread quickly and out of control. Assistance from AEV must be requested by each county and the volunteers work only under the county sheriffs' direction. Their mission was expanded from rescuing dogs and cats to other family pets and small farm animals. They were loading chickens into horse trailers at midnight as flames reached high into the smoke-filled skies near Buffalo Creek. Llamas, horses and other large animals were taken to county fairgrounds where more volunteers cared for them.

Once an area has been evacuated, residents are not allowed to return home to care for or to rescue their own animals until the area has been deemed safe by designated authorities. Animals are not allowed into the shelters made available to displaced residents. Imagine the feelings of helplessness knowing that the family pets would be in harm's way! In order to help with the logistics, residents are encouraged to provide permanent ID for their pets in the form of microchips, tattoos and collars with printed ID tags. Volunteers evacuating pets leave a telephone number for the owners to call for information.

The firefighters, slurry bombers, and helicopter pilots are the round-the-clock heroes during wildfires along with the Red Cross and the Salvation Army volunteers who man the shelters and provide emergency food and water. For each family whose pet was rescued during this tragic fire, another group of heroes has emerged and made it possible for entire families to be reunited once it was safe to go home.

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