The increasing frequency of severe weather events means today's veterinarians are called upon to prepare for and respond to disasters more often, making it more important than ever to accentuate veterinary education with disaster preparedness and response training.

The Texas A&M School of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences addresses the need for veterinarians who are prepared to assist during emergencies through a curriculum that includes a 2-week clinical rotation exploring these critical areas.

The fourth-year rotation, led by the Texas A&M Veterinary Emergency Team (VET), provides medical support to urban search-and-rescue teams and resident animals in response to disasters at the request of the State of Texas or county jurisdictions.

Students who complete the rotation graduate with an AVMA veterinary first responder certificate.

The first week focuses on preparedness, with students traveling with the VET to a Texas county, meeting with county leaders, conducting a community assessment, and developing a disaster preparedness plan, under guidance from VET leadership, designed to meet the area's unique needs. Students are also introduced to risk analysis and develop a preparedness plan for their future practices.

Through these activities, students learn the importance of working with community leaders to establish disaster-response plans and teams.

The second week of the rotation includes disaster response practice, during which most sections exercise what they've learned in a capstone simulation using Second Life. This computer simulation immerses students in a virtual disaster scenario in which they are required to use their understanding of the Incident Command System, disaster medical triage decision-making, field medical care, and the integration of response to achieve local jurisdiction goals and resident animal needs.

When the VET deploys to a disaster, students on the rotation deploy with the team and get real-world experience in these domains.

“Students benefit from these experiences, whether virtual or an actual deployment, because the high-demand, pressure, and pace of disaster response can be very different from traditional veterinary practice,” said VET interim director Dr. Deb Zoran.

One rotation also participates in an annual training exercise called Operation Border Health Preparedness, hosted by the Texas Department of State Health Services. This exercise tests the team’s preparedness for the next major disaster and allows the VET to provide veterinary care to animals in communities that would otherwise go without.

This invaluable exercise allows VET members and students to practice establishing a base of veterinary operations, and in 2023, they provided care for > 1,000 patients in a single week.

Students walk away from the VET rotation with a better understanding of a veterinarian’s role in disaster response and a taste of what it takes to lead in an emergency.

One alumnus found the VET rotation particularly helpful when his community was engulfed in a wildfire. “The VET rotation prepared me for the experience,” he said. “Because I’d saved my personal preparedness plan and updated it every year, I pulled it out when the fires began. Thinking of the situations I encountered in the rotation really helped me, too.”