

Alaqua Animal Refuge: A Tale of Survival from Hurricane Sally's Wrath

Florida Animal Refuge Evacuates Shelter and Survives Massive Rain and Flooding

FREEPORT, FL, USA, September 18, 2020 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Alaqua Animal Refuge, located in the Florida Panhandle slightly northeast of Destin, prides itself on best operating practices, including those for its animals, staff, and overall facility. With the onset of Hurricane's Sally's original projected path headed to Louisiana earlier this week, and following local emergency guidelines, the 10-acre Refuge felt secure in not evacuating its facility.



Alaqua Storage Barn and Flooded Animal Areas

On Tuesday afternoon, things quickly changed and a voluntary evacuation and flood warning were issued to areas in a high-risk zone of flooding. Within minutes, Alaqua made a swift and difficult decision to evacuate the most vulnerable animals from the shelter due to the increase of massive rain and wind. The shelter's close proximity to the Choctawhatchee Bay and the safety of the animals were key factors in the decision, as the Refuge sits on a peninsula of land surrounded by the bay to the south and a river to the north.

Alaqua immediately reached out to its volunteer foster families, who helped move most of the dogs and cats from the property to safer locations by nightfall. Mostly farm animals remained and all them were also moved to higher ground for safety purposes.

By Wednesday morning, Hurricane Sally had made her landfall and there was an additional 1-2 feet of water over most of the Refuge's property and structures.

Alaqua Founder Laurie Hood was not able to shake an earlier image of a possum clinging to a fence post and went back out to rescue it. Traveling in a kayak, she found the possum and gently got it onto the vessel and headed to the higher ground at the Refuge to release it. When she

arrived, things had drastically changed. The flooding was massive and varied with some areas 2-3 feet and other areas 5-feet or more with no access to the property from the road except by boat.

"I immediately realized that the water had risen at least another foot or more and the high grounds were now submerged. I panicked and called my family and additional staff for back up, as the goats and pigs were all treading water," said Hood.

Hood's husband, her two sons, and staff rescued dozens of goats, sheep, mini horses, turkeys, and pigs via paddle boards and kayaks and they were all taken to the last patch of high ground at the Refuge.

It took hours to rescue the animals and save their lives as they had to walk through waist deep, debris ridden water. At one point, wire cutters were used to cut a fence down to swim the animals to a higher spot in a neighbor's yard.

"Full-sized horses that were not in danger were now chest high in water and we had to swim them out. I remembered the two emus and when I got back to their pen, I sunk up to my chest. We literally swam them out of there. It was so scary," recounted Hood. "I am so incredibly proud of my family and staff who did whatever it took to make sure none of these animals lost their lives."

The water began to subside on Thursday morning, and the Walton County Sheriff's Office (Florida) stepped in and helped move the remaining animals off Alaqua's property so the massive cleanup could begin.

The small buildings that serve as animal housing were all submerged in water and will need to be repaired and cleaned before the animals can return and call them home again. Supplies were lost, but lives were saved. And that is what is most important.

"Hurricane Sally surprised us and the area around us. It delivered more rain and impact than we were anticipating, or arrangements would have been made sooner," Hood said. "We are so looking forward to the day when we will not have to deal with weather events and flooding such as this. It is one of the main reasons we have been trying to move from this location for many years. And luckily, our move to our future home is near and is even more critical as its location is high and dry and evacuations such as this will no longer be necessary."

Through the ongoing challenges of COVID-19, annual fundraisers coming to a halt, and now Hurricane Sally, Alaqua has depended upon the community's support to help them with their ongoing operations and survival. The cleanup process will be a lengthy one but Alaqua is secure is knowing they will come out on the other side and be able to continue its mission of providing shelter, safety, and second chances for animals all kinds. Right now, donations are needed more than anything and can be made at: <http://bit.ly/AlaquaDonate>

The Refuge is posting their daily progress with cleanup and operations on their Facebook page, and appreciates all the support given so far—for the love of animals, and Alaqua.

ABOUT ALAQUA

Alaqua Animal Refuge is a no-kill animal shelter and sanctuary, located in the panhandle of Florida. As the Southeast's premier no-kill 501(c)3 refuge and sanctuary, Alaqua believes that every abused, neglected and homeless animal deserves a second chance. Committed to providing protection, shelter and care to animals in need, this private, non-profit Refuge also offers a full-service adoption center, educational outreach, and community programs that extend far beyond their geographic location. Since its inception in 2007, Alaqua has become a recognized leader in animal rescue, welfare, cruelty prevention, and advocacy. Alaqua is currently in the midst of a relocation and expansion capital campaign to build a one-of-a-kind facility—the first in the United States—on 100 donated acres. The new facility and sanctuary will allow Alaqua to continue all of the important work that is done now, as well as be an educational and training center to empower others to help animals and recreate the model worldwide. To learn more, visit www.Alaqua.org

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