The current fires here in Alaska are fresh in my mind as I write this article about evacuating pets in an emergency. Many communities have been evacuated, many homes have been burned and there have been some near misses. Many of us are concerned not only about getting our family out of danger but also about protecting our four-legged friends.

If animals aren’t evacuated at the same time as the rest of the family, they may remain untended for weeks or be taken to the shelter. Or worse, they may be in danger of death or injury. A loose pet can be in substantial danger from debris, contaminated food and water, and unsafe homes.

To be certain that your pets are protected in a disaster, planning is key. Start getting ready now, so when the disaster hits, you’ll be ready.

Be sure to identify your pets. Make sure that they have collars and clearly marked tags with your name and phone number. You might even want to microchip them. The few dollars it costs will ensure that the pet will be traceable. Take a current picture of your animals in case you get separated.

Just like the disaster kit you put together for your family, make sure you pack a disaster kit for your pets. You should pack enough food and water for a minimum of three days as well as bowls and a can opener, if needed to access food.

The emergency kit should include medications, current veterinary records, leashes or harnesses, carriers for transport, plastic bags for waste, cat box and litter, and information on feeding schedules, medical conditions and behavior problems. Don’t forget your veterinarian’s phone number in case you have to call about boarding.
Find a safe place for your animals ahead of time. You may be able to evacuate to a shelter, but many shelters are not equipped for animals. The last time we had a large forest fire, the fairgrounds was opened to accommodate all the animals. Isn’t it wonderful that we live in a community where others are concerned about not only your welfare but also your animals’ welfare?

When the evacuation orders come, leave immediately and take all your pets with you. If the area isn’t safe for you, it isn’t safe for your pet. Evacuate at the first warning. This will give you time to secure your pets and your family before anxiety ensues.

Should you choose to stay home to ride out any disaster, be sure to do it safely. Make a pet-friendly area in your home and move emergency supplies to that room. Pets may be alarmed by noises and unusual smells, so make them comfortable and help allay their fears. Be sure to include their bed, favorite blanket and any toys that they might be attached to.

Even after the disaster is over, you must still pay attention to your pets’ welfare. Things will look and smell different to them. Don’t allow them to run loose. Watch out for wild animals that might be seeking refuge from the disaster. Go back to your regular schedule, but watch for evidence of fear, panic or stress.

Be sure to take care of all members of your family — including pets — in case of disaster.

**Roxie Rodgers Dinstel is associate director of Cooperative Extension Service, a part of the University of Alaska Fairbanks, working in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Questions or column requests can be e-mailed to her at rrdinstel@alaska.edu or by calling 907-474-7201.**