

# THE COST OF ANIMAL RESCUES

Report from Western Morning News-UK

Highlighted by Dr Rebecca Gimenez and Slim Ray

ANIMAL rescues by West Country firefighters have cost more than £1.2 million in the last five years, the WMN can reveal.

The creatures in distress included a sheep on the roof of a bungalow, a 5ft iguana stuck up a chimney and a squirrel running loose in a shop.

There were also 999 calls for several horses and a donkey taking a dip in swimming pools, a budgie stuck behind a heater and a rabbit trapped in the springs of a bed.

Firefighters in Devon, Cornwall and Somerset were called out more than 2,300 times to deal with trapped animals in the last five years.

The sums involved confirm the West Country as a region of animal lovers. Across the three counties, helping dogs cost £156,000, cats more than £100,000, cows almost £400,000 and horses a total of £375,000. The bill for rescuing scores of seagulls and pigeons also ran into thousands.

Last night, fire chiefs insisted that they were right to use public money to help pets, farm animals and wildlife.

The rescues could often provide useful training for when a human found themselves in difficulty. Deterring people from dialing 999 could lead to them getting into danger as well if they attempted a rescue themselves.

But critics said only the most serious incidents should be tackled by firefighters, given the "very large" amounts of public money spent rescuing their furry and feathered friends.

Across Devon, Cornwall and Somerset, the emergency services are called upon to rescue an animal almost nine times a week, according to figures obtained by the WMN under Freedom of Information laws.

The Westcountry's two most expensive rescues from 2004-2009 were both in Cornwall. An estimated bill of almost £10,000 was run up during a 40-hour rescue of a calf down a shaft in St Ives in December 2005. The call-out records note: "Rescue attempt made in daylight but unsuccessful due to partial collapse of shaft."

And in February 2006, a mammoth 50-hour rescue cost more than £12,000 after a dog fell down a shaft. The dog was rescued unharmed.

Over five years, the bill in Cornwall for rescuing animals totaled £167,682.

A Cornwall Fire Service spokesman said no charge was made if the RSPCA made a request for help in rescuing an animal "for humanitarian reasons".

If a member of the public requested an animal rescue and the animal had a "monetary value" such as livestock, the fire service would discuss with the owner whether they had an insurance policy to cover the

animal and whether they would be claiming from the policy. If so, a charge may be made to the owner. "The fire service is wary of making a charge for rescuing animals as this may result in individuals attempting to rescue the animal themselves and putting themselves in danger.

"If this should happen, the financial cost of rescuing the animal and would-be rescuer may well be greater and may well have more serious implications."

**The Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Service calculated the cost involved based on its standard rate for call-out charge.**

In Devon, the total came to £368,472 over five years and in Somerset £683,280.

Bernard Hughes, chairman of the Devon and Somerset Fire Authority, said he wanted the public to think they were calling "a can-do service".

"We try to maintain a friendly and helpful relationship with the general public. If people think we can help, then ask. But there is obviously a price on this.

"The general public get very distressed when they see animals and birds in distress. I wouldn't like to see the time coming when a member of the public calls for help and we choose not to respond because of the cost.

"But people ringing and asking for help should just be absolutely certain that there is no other way that this bird or animal can be helped. I would hope that not too many people will criticise us."

However, some warned that livesaving firefighters should not be called out every time an animal got into trouble.

Susie Squire, campaign manager for the Taxpayers' Alliance pressure group, said: "It is absolutely natural to want to save pets and farm animals from distress or dangerous situations.

"But a very large amount of taxpayers' money is being spent on what is essentially not the core work of the fire brigade, which could potentially put human lives at risk at some stage.

There needs to be some perspective and only the most perilous animals in distress should be followed up by the fire brigade."

But it is not just animals at the centre of unorthodox rescues for West Country firefighters. In March, it emerged that crews were called out on average once a month to help lift obese people, at an estimated total cost of £119,000 in the last five years. The 21 call-outs to lift obese people in Cornwall since 2004 was estimated to have cost the public purse £48,000 while the Devon and Somerset brigade attended 31 incidents with a £71,000 price tag.

The incidents in Devon and Somerset included both men and women being lifted from upstairs windows while in Cornwall, help was needed by a 21-stone woman who had fallen over.

Firefighters were also called in to winch a 29-stone man through a caravan window.



TRU, New Milton and MRV fire crews expend considerable time and effort to rescue a cow trapped in mud. Far from feeling that animal rescues were a waste of tax payers money Hampshire Fire & Rescue went on to invest in dedicated animal rescue officers and equipment for such tasks.

## MISSING THE POINT....AGAIN

*If ever there was a contrived story this is it and we see it so often in relation to that old scare-mongering statement 'cost to the taxpayer'.*

*ALL animal rescues, obese casualty lifts and numerous other 'trivial' rescues that the Fire Service might be called upon to perform are valid and the costs quoted are often absolute nonsense. If full time fire crews are on a station cleaning the yard, cleaning the trucks or doing physical exercise training (PT) they are costing the taxpayer virtually the same as when they are out on a job. The only difference is that being on a job IS serving the taxpayer, is creating goodwill in the community, is keeping the crews occupied and motivated and most importantly is often good training especially where*

*large animals, technical entrapments and obese humans are concerned. Costs to taxpayer only occur where the fire crews involved are retained (part-time) which in the UK involves a payment per callout and this could well be the case with rural brigades like Cornwall, Devon and Somerset. Nevertheless, we need to get away from this nonsensical attitude that a full time firefighter on any call other than a fire or vehicle extrication is using up valuable resources and is being distracted from a possible life-threatening call - believe me, if any incident occurs while a crew is engaged in getting a cat out of tree or a dog out of a hole they will immediately prioritise and get on their way!*

*IN the case of the voluntary sector operating on a call-out basis - RNLI, inshore rescue, mountain rescue, cave rescue etc and coastguard teams there may well be an argument for 'trivial' calls costing money since all these folk have day-jobs that have to be left to attend a call. Even here though, most will say they want to go regardless of how 'trivial' the call, that's why they joined rescue.*

*Back to the full-time services and the other thing to consider in the "wasting of taxpayers' money" argument is just how much money is wasted on everything from ineffectual management, inappropriate equipment purchases, to smoke alarm installations and checks that should have been civilianised decades ago.*

*£1.2 million in five years for animal rescues is an exaggerated figure that doesn't take into account the costs involved in the same period of the same fire crews doing absolutely nothing. I suspect the actual costs would be in the hundreds of thousands in the case of retained crews and if these were whole time crews then probably only a few thousand for fuel, equipment renewal and overtime!*

*The fire service is here to serve and aside from the perennial lazy old-hand that every watch/station seems to have who will moan about anything that drags him away from the TV, crews actually WANT to get out and help. If you really want to question where tax payers' money is being wasted there are plenty of other more tangible culprits.*

ADE SCOTT