The US Economic Crisis & Pets
By Dr. Julio Correa, Associate Professor & Extension Animal Scientist

Americans are sacrificing a lot during the current economic crisis, but they are not the only ones. Household pets, often considered to be a part of the family, have been among the voiceless victims affected by financial hardship.

Dog and cat owners are finding it increasingly difficult to pay for the food and medical bills of their additional family members because they have lost their jobs, homes, or cannot afford rent on a large apartment. Those who lose their homes to foreclosure often have to relocate and downsize. Many end up living in cramped spaces with relatives and friends or go into rented accommodations where the landlord does not permit pets. Under these conditions, some people entrust their dogs and cats to family and friends while others try to place them up for adoption. However, many people who are evicted due to the subprime mortgage crisis just leave their companion animals in the house or back yard to fend for themselves.

The number of companion pets left behind in foreclosed homes is increasing. Dogs and cats are overflowing shelters across the country, particularly in some Southern states. In late 2008, area animal shelters and rescue operations reported their numbers up by 15 to 20 percent, or more in some cases. During tough times fewer pets are adopted and many shelters have fewer resources to take care of the animals. The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals has warned that the continuing economic downturn is threatening to create a serious animal protection problem.

Many pet owners are caught between a rock and a hard place when it comes to the health and safety of their pets and the substantial costs it takes to care for them. However, there is light at the end of the tunnel. The following steps can help keep people and pets together through foreclosures and other financial crises:

- Take the time to think of your pets and come up with an action plan.
- If you are moving into a rental property, make sure pets are allowed and obtain written permission in advance.

Who let the Dogs out?
By Tyrone Smith, Urban Regional Extension Agent

We all wish to lead an active life, but for people with physical disabilities, each day holds a number of obstacles to overcome. The use of our limbs or senses is something many of us take for granted. Therefore, we may not fully understand the frustration of trying to complete a task in the dark or not being able to hear the phone when it rings. Animals can help to make life a little easier for individuals that are physically challenged.

Have you ever considered the idea of “employing” a dog as a helper? Service organizations across the country understand the need for individuals that are blind, deaf, or physically challenged to be more independent. The belief behind this concept is that instead of being taken care of, persons with disabilities should be given opportunities to take charge of their own lives.

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Running a small farm can be a fun and healthy experience for families. For example, raising livestock can create abundant opportunities for families to spend quality time together learning about farm responsibilities, teamwork, the cycle of life, and how to produce wholesome products. These experiences might include cleaning the barn, loading 50-lb bales of hay or feed, or wrestling 100-lb animals to administer vaccinations or to trim hooves.

**Goat & Sheep Trivia**
According to the 2007 Census of Agriculture by the United States Department of Agriculture, there are more than 88,000 sheep and goats in Alabama. Alabama is ranked among the top ten goat producing states in the nation with Tennessee ranking number two. The average goat population on a farm is 30-40 goats, while the average size of a goat or sheep farm is less than ten acres. These farms are usually managed by retired couples or people who have full-time jobs elsewhere.

How many goats or sheep can one farm raise? The typical Extension answer is “that depends,” on total acreage, vegetation for animals to graze, and how much work a family is willing to do. In ideal conditions where there is lush vegetation, a stocking rate of four to five adult goats or sheep is feasible. However, the stocking rate should be lower during a drought year. The smaller the operation, the easier it is to manage.

Gestation occurs for five months or 150 days. An ideal kidding/lambing (birthing) will yield two kids or lambs, although there may be more. When will they give birth? Pick the coldest day of the year with strong winds, late at night, and add to that the possibility of birthing complications. One of your animals might go into labor in the middle of a field and need immediate assistance that very night.

**The Culinary and Nutritional Aspect**
Goat and lamb meat are being recognized for their nutritional value and are two of the most commonly consumed red meats throughout the world. Goat meat comprises 63 percent of all red meat consumed worldwide, and is much healthier than any red or white meat. Also, because of their texture, goat and lamb meat is more easily digested by the human stomach. Goats are easy to rear on limited land space and their meat is ideal for barbeque, stew, or burgers.

Goat and sheep milk can also be processed into various forms of hard and soft cheeses that can be found in larger stores. With added flavoring such as honey, blueberry, cinnamon, Tuscan, and ranch, soft cheeses are a culinary delight. The fats in goat cheese are smaller with short-chain fatty acids and produce a softer curd. This makes it easier to break down and digest the cheese. Also, goat milk is an option for individuals that are lactose intolerant to cow’s milk.

Now that you know more about goats and sheep than you wanted to know, and are craving a tasty goat burger with a glass of cold goat milk; just remember, farming can be a fun-filled learning experience! Alabama goat and sheep farmers and their families can take pride in knowing they are producing a healthy, nutritional product on their very own farm. After all, agriculture is still the number one industry in Alabama!

**Mineral Supplement Tips for Meat Goats**
By Tommie Teacher, Urban Regional Extension Agent

Any long-time goat producer can attest to the fact that goats are unique creatures. They exhibit unique behavior quite unlike any other type of livestock. This is especially true when referring to feeding behavior. One of the most frequently asked questions is, “How do I get my goats to consistently eat minerals?”

Many goat producers do not have the proper amounts of mineral supplements in their meat goat ration. The good news is that this problem is usually alleviated with a few simple management tips.
Mineral Supplement Tips for Meat Goats

Give goats convenient access to mineral supplements.
Mineral supplements must be consumed at recommended levels in order to provide the advertised benefits. Therefore, it makes no sense to make goats compete for minerals. Be sure to provide an adequate number of mineral feeders and/or blocks to reduce competition. I generally recommend one block of mineral feed per ten head of goats, but this recommendation may vary among products. Be sure to read the manufacturer’s directions for use. Generally, place mineral feeders or blocks a minimum of 10-feet apart. This allows all goats, no matter their status in the pecking order, the opportunity to access mineral supplements. Also, place mineral supplements in areas where goats frequent. This is typically within 50-feet of water source, loading area, or feeding area. However, situations may vary from farm to farm. Be sure to avoid making animals travel excessively in order to receive the mineral supplementation they need.

Goat producers follow label directions.
Never mix a commercial-free choice mineral with any outside ingredient such as salt, molasses, or pellet feed unless directed to do so by the label feeding instructions. Mixing only serves to dilute the minerals and vitamins provided. This way, your goats won’t get the full benefit of the supplement that results in wasted money on your part. Always use a commercial product as directed on the packaging.

Economic Crisis & Pets

- If you must give your pets to others to ease your financial burden, choose reliable individuals or give them to legal adoption centers.
- Make every possible effort to place your pets in a proper home before turning them over to a shelter or rescue group.
- If you reach the point of surrendering your pets, look for a “no-kill” shelter that does not euthanize animals unless there are medical complications. This allows you to pick your pets up again when situations stabilize.
- If a shelter agrees to take in your pets, provide behavior information, medical records, and other information that might assist shelter workers in finding your pets new owners.

The following programs can be developed and implemented by Extension professionals and volunteers to help people and their pets through foreclosures and other financial crises:

- In collaboration with non-profit animal protection organizations and local government agencies, start pet food banks that provide assistance to help owners of dogs and cats through hard times.
- Establish partnerships with local veterinary clinics to provide low-cost healthcare for sick and injured pets owned by people affected by the current economic crisis in some way.
- Establish partnerships with city and state agencies to ask for donations from the charitable arm of pet specialty retailers such as PetSmart and PETCO.
- Develop and implement communication campaigns aimed at reducing the number of companion animals left behind in foreclosed homes. People should be reiterated that leaving their pets at a “no-kill” shelter is by far more humane than leaving them in an apartment or a house alone. The shelter can provide food and housing while they try to locate a new home. Petfinder.com also advertises pets in need of new owners.
Who let the Dogs out?
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Service Dogs
Service dogs are trained to help people with a wide range of physical disabilities. Service dog candidates are carefully selected for their temperament and are matched with the personality of their future owner. Then they are carefully trained to meet the specific needs of the individual they will be working with. Tasks that a service dog can be trained to do are retrieving a dropped object, pulling a wheelchair, opening doors, turning on a light switch, pushing an elevator button, or carrying items like books, bags, and shopping baskets.

Hearing Dogs
Silence or peace and quiet is something we seek from the noisy world we live in. Yet you could feel lonely and isolated as a deaf or hearing impaired person who could not hear the telephone ring, a newborn's cry, or an alarm clock. Think how anxious you would be if you were unable to hear warning sounds alerting you to danger. Professionally trained dogs are now able to ease these burdens plus offer companionship. This kind of friendship comes without the concern of whether or not you will be able to communicate effectively with your new friend. Dogs speak the universal language of love and are trained to respond to an individual's own set of cues and commands.

Dogs can be trained to alert their owners to such important sounds that occur in their environment as a telephone call, a knock at the door, a buzzer, a smoke alarm, on-coming traffic, a baby's cry, an alarm clock, or other sounds that indicate emergency or danger.

There are many options available to the deaf, such as mechanical devices that flash or vibrate that may be ineffective. The other option is the reliance on family, friends, or home aides. These options are not always the best arrangements for a person who wishes to live an independent life because they do not allow either party much personal space or freedom.

Seeing Dogs
For someone who is blind or who has a severe visual impairment, the ability to get around freely is one of the most important factors contributing to independence. Leader dogs have allowed blind people to choose among a greater variety of job opportunities. They are helping many students move freely around campus and to travel between home, work, or school. In addition, leader dogs are chosen for their intelligence, gentleness, sound temperament, and compatibility with their owners. These are qualities we seek in someone we rely on and spend a great deal of time with.

Social Dogs
Social dogs are primarily trained to assist people with developmental disabilities and the elderly by providing the loving interaction known as animal-assistive therapy or pet-facilitated therapy. They play a therapeutic role by providing sensory stimulation to an individual who pets them. They also provide affection and physical contact to people who lack physical closeness with others. Many hospitals and nursing homes have integrated animal therapies into their schedules because they see the difference animals make in the lives of the people they nurture.

For more information about Dogs as Companion Animals, please make plans to attend Extension’s next North Alabama Dog Expo. For more information, please contact Tyrone Smith at (256) 532-1578.
So, you Want to be a Farmer?
By Dr. Jannie Carter, Extension Assistant Director

As our economy recovers from a downturn, many people are considering options for lifestyle changes that will support getting by on less. In difficult times we have a tendency to focus on what can be scaled down or eliminated, and we generally reflect on "getting back to the basics" or "how it used to be done" when resources were limited.

Resource management and job outlooks are high priorities for getting families and communities on track for an economic turn-around. The farming industry has been on the decline over the past several years, but agricultural leaders are encouraging citizens to take a closer look at what farming has to offer as prospective employment. Looking at old things in a new way or "getting back to the basics of farming" presents considerable opportunities for new farmers. In the twenty-first century agricultural research and advancements position new farmers for success as they pursue new farming markets such as niche and diversified crops.

Successful farming has been compared to a friendly game of cards; you have to know when to hold and fold. So even though alternative agricultural approaches to farming have been touted for years by visionaries who have seen the potential in nontraditional farm animals and crops, some wait for the optimal moment. Perhaps the time is just right for producing new farmers and small farm developments.

Launching into a successful farming venture is like starting a small business. Much of the small farm definition is appealing to young families with an entrepreneurial spirit because small farms tend to be more diversified in products, management, and ownership. The idea of being one's own boss generally arouses interest. And, while the concept of a new farmer does not necessarily imply a small farm, the tendency generally is to start small.

Income is used as a predictor of farm size. Most new farmers begin with a small amount of acreage and capital and are therefore likely classified as small farmers. But consideration is also given to the total income grossed from all farm products and processes, so acreage is not the only measure. Statistically, minority farmers comprise the largest portion of small farmers, including African Americans and Hispanics. Small farms are generally family owned where the family puts in more time and labor than hired hands, allowing for a certain level of independence of ownership and management. These points are particularly important for new farmers who may need to define their farm status for start-up support. There is a movement in grants and incentive programs from some of the more well-known funding entities to support new farmers, organic farmers and conservationists, new product markets, and small farm enterprises.

Engaging new farmers helps to ensure continued production to meet our agricultural needs. The United States Department of Agriculture’s National Agricultural Library links to a wealth of resources for starting or diversifying an agricultural business at http://afsic.nal.usda.gov. There are fact sheets on alternative livestock breeds including emus, game birds, llamas, rabbits, and goats. Information is also available for the inexperienced producer that includes marketing, production, budgeting, and farming resources.
Trees Help to Promote Business
By Michael McIntyre, Urban Regional Extension Agent

It’s important to know the proper way to plant a tree so that it can grow strong and healthy, or that trees take in carbon emission that can be harmful to us and the environment. But did you know that trees also have the ability to change people’s behavior about where they shop?

Have you ever noticed that trees are seldom planted around stores or service stations? Business owners often think that trees obstruct a customer’s view of their goods or that trees could damage the building during stormy weather. Some business owners prefer to avoid the extra burden of raking up leaves, or watering or pruning trees in late winter or early spring. However, trees have a way of welcoming customers before they get inside. An increase in the number of customers visiting your business could yield greater economic benefits in the long run. In fact, a national study conducted by social scientists at the University of Washington revealed that customers were willing to pay an average of 12 percent more for products sold in tree districts.

The bottom line is that trees are good for the bottom line, no pun intended. They attract visitors and even those that are curious about the type of trees you have on your establishment. Once attracted to your business, consumers are more apt to purchase items. Shoppers view entrepreneurs with trees as good stewards of the environment as indicated in a study conducted in a Southern community. Seventy-four percent of survey participants preferred to patronize businesses with beautiful landscapes.

In a time of economic downturn, entrepreneurs might consider increasing their profit margins by incorporating a little nature into their business. Consult an Extension horticulturalist to find out what plants are suitable for your business and lifestyle.
Lichens are inconspicuous, hardy, and adaptive plants that are composed of fungi and blue-green algae. This union produces an organism unlike the fungi or algae. Both partners contribute to its growth and survival. Most of the lichens you see on trees are probably gray-green; however they vary in color from yellow and orange to dark brown.

The appearance of lichen is usually related to damage from environmental stress or poor management. Exposed limbs on damaged plants simply give lichens access to the sun they need for growth with little competition.

Lichens are not picky about where they live. They can be found on exposed surfaces of limbs, stumps, fence posts, soil, rocks, and other living and nonliving objects. They attach firmly to their host and are usually found on limbs and trunks of large mature trees and shrubs in full sun. Lichen is most commonly found on trees with thin canopies. They usually do not thrive on heavily shaded twigs or branches of healthy woody plants.

Lichens reproduce by pieces breaking off and fragments being spread by wind, splashing water, or other means. Generally, their reproduction process is not a concern. However, certain kinds of lichens on leaves may shade foliage, and thick coverage on limbs may interfere with gas exchanges of plant tissues.

Good plant vigor is the best defense against lichens. Good growing conditions, proper watering, and soil fertility are major parts of this defense. Light pruning of affected limbs will remove some lichens and stimulate new shoot growth to help shade out other lichens. There are no pesticides registered for the control of this plant life.

Unfortunately, lichens often get blamed for killing trees or shrubs. So, if lichens are innocent bystanders, then who killed your tree? A good possibility is your lawn mower or weed trimmer. These machines cut through the bark, girdle trees, or just knock the bark off causing damage or complete desolation of the plants water-carrying vessels inside. Other problems could be caused by borer insects, the lack of fertilizer, or several other arboreal criminals. It’s not likely that the “lichen brothers” were involved at all. Therefore, I enter a plea of innocent on their behalf and ask that we clear their name once and for all. All of this false blame could be “lichened to slander.”

No Pesticides Required for Urban Gardening
By Michael McIntyre, Urban Regional Extension Agent

You may observe while shopping at the grocery store or farmer’s market that some garden produce has insect damage and other produce does not. With cost not being a factor, which one would you choose? Most of us would select the produce without insect damage. However, most likely this produce has been treated with pesticides.

If you planted your spring garden early this year perhaps you have an advantage over most insect pests. Good soil preparation and manure should make your plants hearty. However, you may still encounter a few garden pests regardless of soil preparation. This is quite normal since most insects are coming out of winter hibernation. However, there is no need to make an urban garden dependent on pesticides.

Pesticides are more widely used on large commercial farms where farmers have little or no direct contact with crops grown. An urban garden operation is much smaller and the gardener can easily examine and hand pick insect pests before any severe damage is done. A diverse garden is the key to minimizing insect damage.

Just as we have our favorite dish, insects thrive on their favorite plants. A mix of plants growing in the garden will attract more insects, but no large outbreak of any one species of pests. Most flowering plants attract bees and butterflies that not only pollinate plants, but also feed on harmful insects. For example, lady bugs are beneficial insects that feed on aphids and aphids feed on plant sap. Certain plants such as marigolds, catnip, dill, rosemary, garlic, and mint all help to reduce insect pests in urban gardens. Some of these plants produce flowers that encourage beneficial insects, while others have chemical properties that destroy harmful insects and provide shelter for beneficial insects. As a rule of thumb urban gardeners should grow plants that produce flowers with sufficient pollen and nectar such as cosmos, golden rod, sweet alyssum, and sunflowers.

Gardening homeowners should eliminate or reduce pesticide use and include flowering plants and herbs, thus protecting themselves and the environment. Contact your county Extension office for more gardening information.
The NIFA Factor
By Wendi Williams, Editor & Extension Communications Specialist

There is one feature that remains constant about Cooperative Extension and that is CHANGE. By October 1, 2009, the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service (CSREES) will undergo a name change and become the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) as stipulated in the Food, Conservation and Energy Act of 2008. This piece of legislation is better known as the Farm Bill. The idea is to make the organization comparable to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the National Science Foundation (NSF) by raising the profile of agricultural research, education, and Extension. Like the NIH and the NSF, NIFA will award competitive external grants for research, particularly in the area of agriculture as it pertains to strengthening national security and developing new technologies and biofuel. The United States Department of Agriculture will remain the parent organization.

According to its Guiding Principles, NIFA like CSREES, will continue to focus on food sciences, agriculture, human health and wellness, communities, and the environment. The common denominator of course is PEOPLE. Greater emphases will be placed on establishing multi-disciplinary programs that encompass research, education, and Extension. Extension has always incorporated these elements beginning with research. Research is transformed into effective programs that positively impact the lives of people and the communities in which they live. Competition will also be stiff for grant funding. Think NIH and NSF to get a better picture of what the future may hold.

Organizational Structure
NIFA will have a top-level director that is an expert in one or more of its program areas (see above), and "appointed to a single, six-year term by the President of the United States, by and with advice and consent of the United States Senate," (Create-21, 2009). NIFA will also be divided into the Institute for Economic Opportunities, the Institute for Nutrition and Health, the Institute for Rural and Urban Community Development, the Institute for Natural Resources and Environment, the Institute for Food Safety and Agricultural Security, and the Institute for Families, Youth, and Communities. More developments are certainly forthcoming as NIFA settles into its new role.

What do these changes mean for Extension programs?
First, as stated earlier, competition will be stiff for grant funding. So, it’s time to brush up on those grant writing skills. Second, it is imperative that program impacts are fully documented. Without proper impact data, it becomes increasingly difficult to secure outside funding both to sustain and to create new programs. Valuable resources are also lost without adequate funding that may eventually include jobs. Third, it means that Extension needs to work a little harder to avoid program duplication and to determine areas where collaboration can occur with the organization and with partners. These are just a portion of the issues Extension is currently facing, particularly in determining program goals for the next decade. Yes, the winds of change are definitely blowing on Extension again!

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