



His Master's Voice: When Disaster Strikes, Your Pet's Microchip Can Speak Volumes

In Oroville, California, Northwest SPCA shelter manager Isha Buis estimates that the toll taken by last year's disastrous wildfires on pet owners is yet to be realized. On one Sunday alone, she recalls, more than 70 intakes had to be transferred to other facilities to relieve pressure on her own shelter, so assessing just how many pets have found their way home is difficult. Additionally, many pet owners are still displaced and struggling to create a home amid a new normal.

But one thing Buis does know is that in most cases, "As long as there's a microchip with correct and current information, it can help pets and their people find each other again."

"The last couple of months have been unreal, and the numbers are still coming in," says Buis, who is also a registered veterinary technician (RVT). "We not only worked hard to help securely house rescued and evacuated animals from the Camp Fire, but medically treated and rehabilitated other needy animals in the midst of that tragedy."

Since 2005 the shelter's policy has been to microchip every animal placed in (or returned to) a home. According to Petfinder.com, the chances of reuniting with a lost pet go up nearly 250% if that dog or cat has a microchip.

"On daily basis I am amazed by the animals we successfully track back to their owners," Buis says. Like a yellow Labrador retriever, lost for a year, and a cat missing for three, who were both recently reunited with their families.

Ten years before the inferno that ravaged northern California became known as the deadliest wildfire in the state's modern history, the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association (JAVMA)* published the findings of a study looking at animals with microchips entering shelters. What it showed was that microchipped stray dogs return to their owners more frequently than strays without microchips (52.2% and 21.9% respectively). Even more dramatically, 38.5% of microchipped stray cats return to their owners compared to only 1.8% of un-microchipped stray cats.

"Cats are the hardest to identify," Buis says, pointing out how pet identification becomes even more difficult when compounded by disfiguring injuries, like those sustained by many of the pets that survived the fires. In such cases a microchip provides help for a lost and possibly injured pet in ways that a photograph cannot supply.

Without microchips or tags, the identification process can be difficult because of the nature of such injuries. Whiskers are singed off. Ears are burned at the edges. What fur may be left has probably been shaved to facilitate treatment by a veterinary team. Some pets could be unrecognizable, even to those who love them.



The study's dramatic contrast in results between chipped and un-chipped pets prompted the AVMA, American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA) and World Small Animal Veterinary Association (WSAVA) to advocate that veterinarians routinely scan all pets to assess the function and proper location of a microchip.

The JAVMA study showed that microchips could help owners find their pets but also warned that only 58% of the microchipped animals in the shelter had current contact information in a microchip registry.

"It's not the chip that fails to get a pet home, it's tracing down the correct information. The problem for pets is when a chip is a dead end," says Buis, who has been using PetLink microchips since the shelter started its program. The company's 30-year history of helping pet owners and veterinarians includes its own dedicated website for companion animal identification, www.petlink.net.

How does it work? A pet microchip, no larger than a grain of rice and containing a unique 15-digit identification code, is implanted under your pet's skin by an animal professional using a special syringe (like the PetLink SLIM "No Return" Click syringe).

After implantation, the microchip code should be registered in a national database like www.petlink.net. The owner's contact information and a description of the pet are entered so when a microchip is scanned, the database will pull up the owner and pet information assigned to that microchip and help reunite the missing pet with its family. PetLink strongly encourages pet owners to add alternate contacts to help with a speedy reunification if the primary contact is not available.

"Are microchips worth it? Absolutely," this California shelter manager concludes. "We have had many animals reunited with their owners due to having a registered microchip. Cats *Maynard* and *Ching Tao* were reunited with their owners Lauren and Betsy after having been gone for more than four years – each in totally different situations.

"The owners had been diligent in keeping their contact information up to date with local animal control as well as their microchip company.

The result? "Such very happy endings."

SIDEBAR: Common Questions About Microchips

Will it hurt my pet when a microchip is implanted?

Microchipping is to a pet what a flu shot is to us. It's a momentary prick but not painful. No anesthetic or stiches are required.



Can microchips cause health issues in animals?

Companion animal microchips are passive – they have no power supply, battery or moving parts. The microchip contains nothing that will burn, irritate or harm a pet. Microchips are completely biocompatible and proven to be safe and effective.

If our pet wears a collar for identification, why microchip?

A collar can be torn, chewed through or removed. A microchip cannot be removed, falsified or altered. A microchip registry keeps your personal information safe and secure; your name, address and phone number are password-protected online.

How can a microchip work if no one can see it?

Microchip scanning is now standard practice for animal control agencies, shelters and most veterinary clinics in North America, Europe and Australia, and is gaining momentum in Asia and Africa. Having a microchip for electronic identification significantly increases your pet's chances of being returned if they are ever lost or stolen.

What's my pet's best protection? All pets should have at least two forms of identification at all times – provide a collar AND a microchip (and don't forget to register the microchip).

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