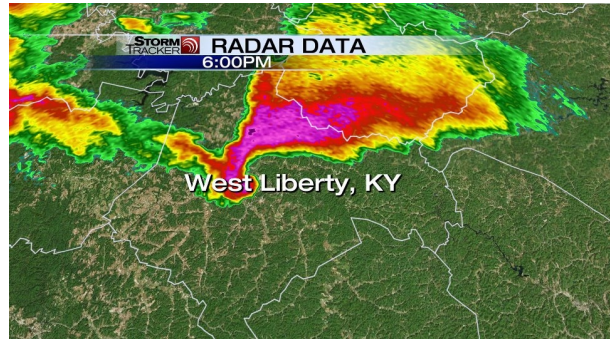


## **MOUNTED PATROL SEARCH & RESCUE IN WEST LIBERTY, KY**

**Victoria Tollman, Executive Director  
Equus Survival Trust**

On Friday, March 2, 2102 a huge storm system moved across the Mid-West and parts of the southeast, spawning dozens of tornadoes and large hail storms. Several towns in Southern Indiana and Eastern Kentucky were literally wiped out.



The town of West Liberty, in Eastern Kentucky was one of the hardest hit; the decimated town and its people have been all over the national news. Red Cross and other human services have quickly responded. Even the Human Society has responded. But there are other casualties in this disaster.



**Mountain Pleasure/Appalachian Purebred Gaited Horse**

Eastern Kentucky is home to over 80% of the world's Mountain Pleasure/Appalachian Purebred Gaited Horses, a critically endangered breed indigenous to Eastern KY and tracing back to the area's statehood. And it's the breeders of this unique breed and their beloved horses that are also suffering along with thousands of people all over the area.

The Equus Survival Trust, ironically once located in West Liberty, is working closely with breeders in the area to provide the relief they need; hay, feed, halter & leads, buckets, portable stabling, fencing & eventually replacement of farm equipment.



**West Liberty Downtown Friday night**

I personally lived in West Liberty with my family for two years when our Equus Survival Trust field office was first established. I have witnessed and admire the resilience and innovativeness of the people there. Eastern Kentuckians have a strong spirit of preservation and a stubborn perseverance in the face of hardship. Those traits, coupled with their small-town generosity, is already at work helping them pull together for the tasks at hand.

I was also gratified to see one of our "own" go to the area and see and help first hand the morning after as the rescue and recovery work began in earnest. I first met Cindy Sither in person as a participant in our Equus Survival Trust's 2008 Festival of Endangered Equines. Cindy is an owner/breeder of Akhal-Tekes, a Central Asian hot-blooded breed known for speed, agility, and exceptional endurance.

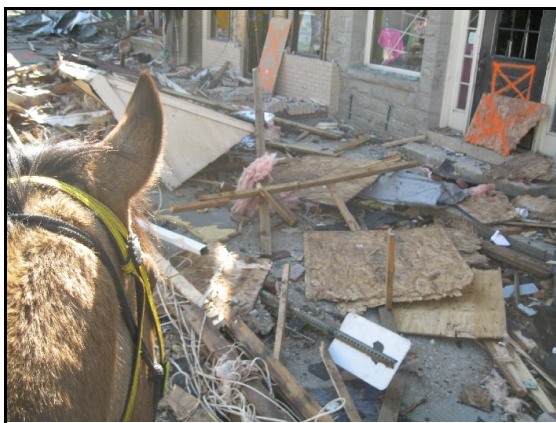
The Akhal-Teke, like the Mountain Pleasure Horse, is also critically endangered. Cindy lives near Lexington, Kentucky and is part of a mounted patrol based in Fayette County. She and her Teke stallion Garpun traveled nearly two hours southeast to West Liberty with the patrol to help out.



*Tornado as it passes over West Liberty*



*Fayette County Buffalo Trace Mounted Patrol..  
Garpun far right*



*Garpun and Cindy Survey the wreckage  
on Main Street in West Liberty.*

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### **Cindy's Eyewitness Account:**

*Garpun and I, along with the other 2 members of Fayette County Buffalo Trace Mounted Patrol, went to West Liberty, Kentucky to help with the tornado disaster there. The state of Kentucky has had mounted volunteer patrol for 3 years and our chapter had previously worked events like the KY state fair and various trainings. This was our team's first outing to actually work a disaster.*

*As it turned out, we were the only mounted patrol team in the state to show up and be used. We arrived Saturday, Day-One after the disaster. We went expecting to sign in with the Incident Command for search and rescue, but law Enforcement snapped us up instead for patrolling the neighborhoods for victims, bodies, and to discourage looters. Our captain, Scott Congleton, a former officer of the Lexington Mounted Police, taught us what to expect and how to do our jobs well and safely.*

*My 7 yr old Akhal-Teke stallion Garpun was an excellent trooper, in spite of being under saddle for only a year. Garpun handled walking from constant and inches emergency traffic, including ambulances, through national guard humvees, tanker trucks, utility trucks with the man-baskets, large bulldozers, and phone company trucks with loads of replacement telephone poles - all such things that would send most horses running for the hills - literally. We walked over a constant spider web of downed power lines, through and under debris (some hanging above us from lines and the few trees left standing), around flipped cars, and untold wreckage.*

*On Sunday, the town was opened back up to allow people into their homes and businesses to assess damage and retrieve anything salvageable. I learned Garpun has a good knack for who needs a hug, and he made very obvious friendly overtures to be hugged and patted by stunned townspeople who needed it. He also made himself conspicuously available to national guardsmen, police from several cities around KY, and the news crew from CBS St. Louis.*



*Patrolling downtown West Liberty*

*The variety of construction and destruction equipment we dealt with was mind boggling. We walked under a huge crane with big jaws transporting car-sized loads of debris into a dump truck from what was once a public building; the crane never stopped moving. Chainsaws were deafening, electric linemen with their specialized cranes and heavy equipment to reset poles were everywhere, along with backhoes, and a helicopter. It was hard, if not impossible, to get out of their way with the debris piled 5 feet high all along edges of the roads where they had been temporarily shoved out of the way.*



*Riding past the West Liberty Judicial Center*

*We lent a sympathetic ear to stunned folks who needed to vent or to desperately recount their experiences; we gently talked shell-shocked folks out of staying in their destroyed, condemned homes and instead directed them to the two shelters in town. We directed countless injured to the medics. Eight out of ten homes were either totally destroyed or marked with orange paint signifying structural damage significant enough to condemn them. Not a single commercial building was left standing. I met people out in Sunday's snows still dressed in shorts and flip flops from Friday night's 70 degree weather. The storms had destroyed or blown away all the rest of their belongings.*



*View of Downtown West Liberty in shambles Saturday morning*

*But people were resilient, pitching in and helping themselves as well as their neighbors. You could see that spirit helping them pull together for the gruesome tasks at hand. On the other side of town, one ready-mart type business was selling much needed ice and groceries with a large blue tarp casually hanging over the missing wall of their destroyed store..*

*Search & Rescue with dogs worked all day Saturday. At this writing, six people are confirmed dead, and several dozen still missing. Incident Command and law enforcement expect to find more bodies as people start clearing more of the debris. Sunday I started noticing stray and lost dogs and I worried about them too.*

*I have never seen anything to compare with the destruction there. The town stretches a couple of miles along a valley and the hills surrounding it. The entire valley is rubble, and much of the trees on the hills flattened. Clean up is only the beginning. Rebuilding will take months and years.*



*I have to say, I am so proud of my horse! He is not the bravest horse I have ever ridden by far, but he seemed to appreciate the seriousness of the situation and was trying very hard to be steady. By Sunday afternoon he was actually feeling confident and wanting to lead our little trio on our patrols. Physically, he held up the best of the 3 horses. It is near impossible to convey the long, stressful hours and distance we covered. When we finally stopped for good late Sunday, the other 2 horses were sore in the back and footsore from the long weekend. Garpun was a little stiff - not surprising after 2 full days walking the tarmac - but he was still spunky, sound, and wanted to keep going - all the things our Akhal-Teke breed is known for.*

*With large numbers of construction crews arriving and working, there are plenty of folk back in the town now, so our services are no longer needed and we are packing up for home. State Police and KY Fish and Wildlife were very happy with our patrol, and have our contact info so we are ready to respond to the call again should the need arise.*

***PLEASE CONTACT THE EQUUS SURVIVAL TRUST for WAYS to DONATE CASH and GOODS.***  
***[www.Equus-Survival-Trust.org](http://www.Equus-Survival-Trust.org) (336) 352-5520***



***Fayette County Buffalo Trace Mounted Patrol on duty in West Liberty, KY. Cindy and her Akhal-Teke stallion Garpun on far right.***