

# Public inquiry into January 2016 Waroona fire

Submission from the Australian Veterinary Association Ltd



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**4 March 2016**

The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) is the national organisation representing veterinarians in Australia. Our 8500 members come from all fields within the veterinary profession. Clinical practitioners work with companion animals, horses, farm animals, such as cattle and sheep, and wildlife. Government veterinarians work with our animal health, public health and quarantine systems while other members work in industry for pharmaceutical and other commercial enterprises. We have members who work in research and teaching in a range of scientific disciplines. Veterinary students are also members of the Association.

## Executive summary

This submission relates primarily to the following specific terms of reference:

1. (b) The effectiveness of emergency management plans and procedures
1. (h) Livestock and companion animal management and welfare issues
3. The need for further reform

Veterinarians consider animal management and welfare issues in disaster extending beyond companion animals and livestock to wildlife. Dealing with injured wildlife is an essential component of any animal welfare emergency response, particularly in relation to bushfires that tend to destroy large tracts of wildlife habitat.

The Waroona bushfire which began on Tuesday 5 January 2016 clearly highlighted the inadequacies of the planning and preparation arrangements for managing the animals affected by this disaster. Veterinary practices in and around the fire affected areas responded immediately to meet the needs of affected animals and displaced people who had animals with them that required veterinary attention. However there were problems for veterinarians and others trying to access animals in need, and returning to the area after obtaining necessary supplies to assist animals. There were coordination and communication problems among those responding to animals' needs, no responsible agency to manage the response, and a free-for-all approach by some voluntary responders that went unchecked.

There is a clear need for Western Australia to catch up to all the other Australian states, which have established effective emergency plans for animal welfare that are now tried and tested. There is no excuse for continuing to ignore this important aspect of emergency planning. The *National planning principles for animals in disasters*<sup>1</sup> set out the rationale for including animals in disaster planning:

- More than half of the Australian public own pets. Previous disasters have shown that animals must be accounted for in order to ensure human safety. The Royal Commission into the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria found that people returned to the fire zone to attempt rescue of their animals. The Queensland Flood Commission of Inquiry found that pet owners were reluctant to evacuate without their animals.
- The direct cost of livestock losses in the Black Saturday fires is conservatively estimated at more than \$18 million. In addition to direct economic losses, the psychosocial wellbeing of individuals and entire farming communities is severely undermined by the loss of animals and livelihoods.
- The community has a strong interest in the fate of wildlife in disasters. After being rescued from the fire ground following the Victorian fires, more than 1.3 million people watched the video of Sam the Koala being cared for. The Victorian Association of Forest Industries estimates that millions of native animals and birds

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<sup>1</sup> National Advisory Committee for Animals in Emergencies. 2013. National planning principles for animals in disasters. Available: [http://www.ava.com.au/sites/default/files/AVA\\_website/FINAL%20National%20Planning%20Principles%20for%20Animals%20in%20Disasters.pdf](http://www.ava.com.au/sites/default/files/AVA_website/FINAL%20National%20Planning%20Principles%20for%20Animals%20in%20Disasters.pdf)

were killed during the 09 Victorian fires, either in the event itself or from starvation or predation following the event. Integration of wildlife into disaster management planning (including threatened species) would enhance community and environmental recovery post-disaster.

The *National planning principles for animals in disasters*<sup>1</sup> also provide a complete set of achievable, best-practice guidelines for animal welfare emergency plans that take into account the experience of multiple jurisdictions in the past 20 years, and aligns with the 2011 National Strategy for Disaster Resilience.

Any planning process requires adequate resourcing, and plans must be periodically reviewed. The WA Government must ensure that the planning process takes place, and is adequately resourced over time.

## Recommendations

1. The WA government establishes a statewide plan to manage animals and their welfare in emergencies following the *National planning principles for animals in disasters*, that:
  - establishes a lead response agency (preferably the Department of Agriculture and Food WA)
  - is prepared in consultation with supporting and cooperating organisations
  - addresses the welfare needs of companion animals, livestock, horses and wildlife
  - includes veterinary input and addresses the need for veterinary participation in responses, and
  - is adequately resourced and maintained.
2. All local government emergency response plans include details of how animals will be managed in emergency scenarios.
3. A veterinary emergency response reserve is established by the Department of Agriculture and Food WA (DAFWA) to maintain readiness in the event of the animal welfare response plan being activated. This readiness must include emergency response training for volunteers and regular updating of veterinary skills such as treating burnt wildlife. The work of the veterinary reserve must occur in close cooperation with local veterinarians and practices in disaster-affected areas.
4. Arrangements are put in place to ensure authorised veterinarians and other animal welfare officers can access injured animals as soon as possible to minimise suffering.
5. The state animal welfare response plan includes contingency planning for warehousing and distribution of donated goods including S4 medications (which have specific regulatory controls attached), animal feed, and pet care accessories.
6. The WA government establishes an education program for animal owners to help them understand the need for planning and preparation for their animals as well as their human family in the event of a bushfire or other disaster.

## What happened

There has been substantial involvement of local veterinary practices in caring for animal welfare during and after the Waroona bushfires. Much of this work was completed on a pro bono basis with practices meeting the cost of staff and veterinary supplies where necessary. Both Waroona Veterinary Clinic and Murray Veterinary Services were supported by significant crowdfunding and donations in their efforts to work pro bono, mostly arising from Facebook communication. More than a month after the crisis, practices were still treating burns on pets, livestock and wildlife, and still seeing new untreated cases.

Waroona Veterinary Clinic remained undamaged throughout the incident, and was the home base for many of the response activities that took place from the outset – caring for pets left behind when owners were evacuated, euthanasing or treating livestock, wildlife and horses. Other veterinary practices such as Murray Veterinary Services also became involved, as did volunteer shooters and other volunteers.

On Friday 8 January, emergency supply delivery arrangements were made with Provet, WA Veterinary Emergency Responders and various other groups and hospitals. The volume of donations arriving at Waroona Veterinary Clinic from a wide range of sources soon became challenging to manage.

The issue of well-meaning donations of S4 drugs through non-licensed channels created a number of problems at sorting and collection points. On 13 January, veterinarians were called to the donations collection centre to remove S4 drugs, which can only be legally handled by veterinary and medical personnel, out of general donations. AVA members also heard about a self-declared veterinary nurse offering non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), enrofloxacin (an antibiotic) and Lethabarb (euthanasia solution) to volunteer carers without veterinary consultation.

By 8 January, there was discussion on Facebook and via email about setting up at least 3 pet triaging stations on the oval or in the veterinary clinic carpark. They were convinced that it was a waste of time to duplicate services when there was a functional veterinary hospital in town that was fully operational.

DAFWA were planning their response on 9 January but were still unable to access the lockdown zone. The following day, DAFWA coordinated with local veterinarians and the government response to animal welfare began. RSPCA WA responders were allowed into Waroona on 11 January, and also coordinated with the local veterinarians. It became apparent that there were many instances of duplicate calls for help between Waroona Veterinary Clinic and RSPCA. A special application needed to be made to allow RSPCA responders to visit Yarloop on 12 January.

By 13 January, veterinarians were assessing cattle to issue fitness-to-travel certification to Harvey Beef which had offered to support salvaging injured cattle via slaughter. Unfortunately, these injured cattle were delayed from reaching the abattoir for a significant period of time due to road closures and roadblocks. This caused a major animal welfare concern through distressed injured cattle being contained in close quarters unnecessarily.

A number of instances were reported to the AVA where members expressed concerns about access restrictions impeding efforts to deliver animal welfare services. These are rightly established to protect human safety, but there needs to be a pre-planned and structured approach that clarifies responsibilities and procedures to address both human safety and animal welfare needs.

DAFWA has a response strategy in place for livestock in emergencies. DAFWA provided this assistance for the Waroona fires as it had in previous fires where significant numbers of livestock were affected. Once the response teams arrived, this worked reasonably well, and there was close liaison between DAFWA officers and local veterinarians to respond to the needs of livestock

The treatment of horses was undertaken mostly by local veterinarians. It was unclear which organisation was caring for them, and so horses were taken to local veterinary practices for treatment.

Pets were cared for by RSPCA and local veterinarians, while rescue organisations and veterinarians attended to injured wildlife.

There was considerable confusion among the many organisations involved in responding to animal welfare, and also in the official emergency management response agencies, about who was responsible for what. Many government response agencies had not even considered animal welfare until contacted by a local veterinarian.

The moment the fires started there was a social media groundswell of interest in knowing what was happening with burnt and injured animals. Veterinary practices received many calls from members of the public wanting to make donations to injured animals, but there was no organisation to accept and remit these donations. By Monday 11 January, Murray Veterinary Services and Murdoch University Veterinary Hospital had 10 horses in care, and it was calculated that the cost of treating these animals in medication, feed, consumables and bandaging alone (without accounting for veterinary time or services) would be close to \$45,000. The owners were not in a position to pay, but there was an overwhelming community expectation that the horses would be given the care they needed. Within two and a half days, crowdfunding was established and had reached the \$45,000 target. This gave rise to administration problems for Murray Veterinary Services as the donated money needed to be handled separately to the working account to avoid accusations of profiteering or misappropriation. In the end, the local MLA Murray

Cowper, agreed to co-sign for the establishment of a new account, 'Yarloop Fire Equine Survivor Fund'. Murray Veterinary Services and Murdoch University Veterinary Hospital then submitted invoices for services rendered to Mr Cowper, allowing a complete audit trail of the expenditure of the donated funds. There is now a question about what to do with any remaining funds in the account after all invoices have been paid.

Veterinary hospitals found dealing with donation of medications and supplies a time-consuming and stressful task, and one that resulted in large amounts of wastage. There were a number of organisations on social media claiming to be accepting supplies from the public. The best and most coordinated response was by practices working directly with the veterinary wholesaler Provet. This meant that the exact supplies that were needed were supplied. Veterinary clinics and drug companies wanting to donate contacted Provet, discovered what was needed, and donated these supplies via Provet (which has a highly efficient distribution network already in place). This prevents the large amount of wastage and unnecessary staff time taken up to manage donated goods.

With the level of care required by burnt animals, veterinary services rapidly found themselves under-resourced. Willing volunteers proved easy to find, and it was a matter of coordinating them effectively and ensuring each volunteer had a proper safety induction. The main insurer of the veterinary profession, Guild Insurance, provided cover as soon as the request for help was made. The local hospitals then had to develop a waiver form, safety induction process and volunteer information sheet.

## Lessons learned

### State emergency plan for animals in emergencies

The AVA participated in the WA 'Animals in Emergencies' working group' hosted by DAFWA between 2012 and 2014. Unfortunately this process stalled after that, and there is still no plan to address animal welfare in emergencies in WA.

Ensuring there is adequate planning and preparedness for disaster management is clearly a responsibility of government, and in the case of bushfires, it is a state government responsibility. Non-government agencies can play a designated support role, providing that resources are available to fulfil the role. The availability of resources is a matter that should be dealt with in the preparation of emergency management plans.

There is now a clear rationale from research and emergency responses in recent years for the welfare of animals being critical to emergency management plans.

Livestock losses in a selection of ten disasters in Australia between 1967 and 2011 are conservatively estimated at approximately 1.6 million animals<sup>2</sup>. Improving disaster preparedness is likely to significantly reduce animal casualties resulting in improved animal welfare outcomes.

In addition to the avoidance of economic losses associated with livestock losses in disasters, interviews with survivors of a South Australian fire found that the loss of livestock represented a "severing of a link between the family and its farming history"<sup>3</sup>. This underlies the risks to community resilience from failure to integrate animals into planning.

The loss of pets in Hurricane Katrina in the United States of America was found to be a greater contributing factor in human psychopathology than the loss of homes<sup>4</sup>. This suggests that failing to recognise the interdependency relationship between humans and animals can result in significant human welfare impacts.

Of the witness testimonies provided to the Royal Commission into the Black Saturday Victorian bushfires, over one-third included reference to animals. Testimony included references to residents who died when they attempted evacuation with animals. Following the Royal Commission's recommendation that animals be integrated into

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<sup>2</sup> Coll, E, *The Case for Preparedness: Quantification of Production Losses due to Livestock Deaths from Disasters in Australia*, Prepared for the World Society for the Protection of Animals, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Background briefings on emerging issues for fire managers from AFAC and Bushfire CRC, *Fire Note / Exploring the Bushfire Experience from a Domestic Perspective*, Issue 40, October 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Hunt, M, Bogue, K & Rohrbaugh, N, Pet Ownership and Evacuation Prior to Hurricane Irene, *Animals* 2012, 2, 529-539.

emergency management planning in order to promote human safety, the Victorian Emergency Animal Welfare Plan was developed.

There are several state emergency plans in Australia that have been tested in real emergencies, and have proven their value. The Victorian and New South Wales plans are both good models to follow.

The responsibility for the overall response for management of animals in disaster emergencies should fall to one government agency. In relation to animals, DAFWA is well placed in terms of experience and emergency response planning and management for animal diseases. DAFWA already has the responsibility to coordinate the response for farmed livestock, along with considerable experience doing so. DAFWA also administers the *WA Animal Welfare Act 2002*. It makes sense that DAFWA is the lead agency for coordinating the overall response for animals affected by bushfires or other disasters.

Disasters and emergencies are usually managed by one of the Hazard Management Agencies prescribed in the *Emergency Management Act 2005*. For fires and floods this agency is the Department of Fire and Emergency Services supported in most cases by local government, which may provide evacuation accommodation and other services even in a state-managed emergency like a bushfire. Local government emergency planning must also take animals into account to respond adequately to community expectations.

**Recommendation 1.** The WA government established a statewide plan to manage animals and their welfare in emergencies following the *National planning principles for animals in disasters*, that:

- establishes a lead response agency (preferably the Department of Agriculture and Food WA)
- is prepared in consultation with supporting and cooperating organisations
- addresses the welfare needs of companion animals, livestock, horses and wildlife
- includes veterinary input and addresses the need for veterinary participation in responses, and
- is adequately resourced and maintained.

**Recommendation 2.** All local government emergency response plans include details of how animals will be managed in emergency scenarios.

### **Veterinary volunteers**

The management of veterinary volunteers is often problematic during natural disasters. The WA state plan to manage animals and their welfare in emergencies must include provisions to secure and manage the services of veterinary volunteers. As demonstrated by the Waroona bushfires, local veterinary infrastructure and expertise are very important to an effective response. Any formal arrangements relating to veterinary volunteers and state plans must take these resources into consideration.

There are currently no arrangements for veterinary volunteers in WA response plans. There is a grassroots movement called WA Veterinary Emergency Responders set up in December 2015 legal entity structure. There are a number of different approaches to how veterinary volunteers are incorporated into state emergency response plans:

- In New South Wales and Victoria, the Australian Veterinary Association is a supporting organisation listed in the plan. The association's role is to facilitate communication with the veterinary profession, primarily to gather and share information with response agencies on veterinary volunteers willing to participate in the response. These volunteers are contacted, assigned and managed by official responding agencies as 'authorised volunteers'.
- In South Australia, the lead agency with responsibility for animal welfare is the Department of Primary Industries. The Department has outsourced veterinary response to a dedicated entity, SA Veterinary Emergency Management (SAVEM). The government funds the training and maintenance of a dedicated veterinary reserve through SAVEM, which is managed by veterinary officers employed by the Department.
- In Tasmania, the Department of Primary Industries, Water and Energy, has just established a veterinary

reserve that is managed by the Department. Some initial training for veterinary reserve volunteers in bushfire response has recently been funded by the Department.

An advantage of an ongoing veterinary reserve is that the reserve could also then easily be mobilised in the event of an emergency animal disease outbreak. This model could work well in WA providing DAFWA has the resources available.

**Recommendation 3.** A veterinary emergency response reserve is established by the Department of Agriculture and Food WA (DAFWA) to maintain readiness in the event of the animal welfare response plan being activated. This readiness must include emergency response training for volunteers and regular updating of veterinary skills such as treating burnt wildlife. The work of the veterinary reserve must occur in close cooperation with local veterinarians and practices in disaster-affected areas.

### **Access to animals**

AVA members have often reported access problems to emergency-affected areas. There needs to be a system whereby authorised veterinarians and others able to address animal welfare concerns are able to access these areas as soon as it is safe to do so. This needs to be set out in all the relevant emergency plans. It requires a common understanding with the frontline responders about the system in place, who is responsible for what, and who has authorisation (and potentially the appropriate training as well) to access affected areas. It needs to be included in emergency response training for all agencies.

**Recommendation 4.** Arrangements are put in place to ensure authorised veterinarians and other animal welfare officers can access injured animals as soon as possible to minimise suffering.

### **Donations**

In the AVA's experience, the management of donated veterinary supplies, including prescription drugs, is a key consideration for an adequate state animal welfare response plan. This is often a recurring theme that needs good planning ahead of an emergency, and effective communication during it as to where to send donations, and how to gain access to goods for those responding to the emergency. Special care needs to be taken in relation to donations of prescription medication. The best approach would be to determine and set out arrangements for this in advance in the state animal welfare response plan.

**Recommendation 5.** The state animal welfare response plan includes contingency planning for warehousing and distribution of donated goods including S4 medications (which have specific regulatory controls attached), animal feed, and pet care accessories.

### **Owner responsibility**

The ultimate responsibility for animal welfare lies with the owner. This is a message that is often forgotten by citizens thinking about planning for disasters like bushfires, but good planning and execution in the event of an emergency will mitigate the need for government and non-government interventions to protect animal welfare, at least for owned animals.

**Recommendation 6.** The WA government establishes an education program for animal owners to help them understand the need for planning and preparation for their animals as well as their human family in the event of a bushfire or other disaster.