



Victoria's bushfire management strategy Consultation

Submission of the
Australian Veterinary Association Ltd

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The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA)

The Australian Veterinary Association appreciates being able to contribute to the consultation of 'Victoria's bushfire management strategy'.

The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) is the national organisation representing veterinarians in Australia. The AVA consists of members who 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.

Summary

Disasters pose significant threats not only to human lives but also to animals, both domestic and wild.

There is a significant gap in Victoria's Bushfire Management Strategy for the consideration of animal life, animal welfare and the economic cost and significant impact on human well-being through relationships, economic, and the cultural importance of animals.

Without Government planning and assistance, the financial burden of a disaster response to treat impacted animals is often imposed onto veterinarians with significant hardship and trauma, through community and government expectations.

It's essential to urgently address animal welfare needs following a disaster such as bushfires and floods to prevent prolonged suffering. Veterinarians play an important role by assessing the requirements of animals and providing essential veterinary care, including euthanasia of those severely injured, to ensure animal welfare needs are met.

Additionally, private veterinary hospitals located throughout Victoria, and Australia are important local infrastructure for reuniting companion animals with their owners, a well-accepted expectation of society.

At least 69 percent of Australians households own one or more pets and Australian farms have an estimated 90 million cattle and sheep livestock. In addition to this, animal related industries are important contributors to the Australian economy. In 2022, the gross value of livestock disposals was some \$25 billion, of which 61.2% (\$15.3 billion) was from the cattle industry. A further \$9.1 billion flowed from livestock products such as wool, milk and eggs.

Discussion

The vision for this Strategy is: "Victorians work together to manage bushfire risk in a changing climate". What are your thoughts on this overall vision?

The veterinary profession acknowledges and is increasingly concerned about the negative effects of climate change such as increased incidence and intensity of natural disasters such as droughts,



heatwaves, bushfires and floods and the impact on the environment and particularly in respect to animal health, welfare, and production.

How well do you think the vision of the Strategy captures the objectives and aspirations of the Victorian community for bushfire management?

Victoria's bushfire management strategy outcome's indicators do not consider animal welfare and the impacts of animal welfare on human well-being.

Whilst it is the responsibility of owners to care for their animals in times of disasters, often assistance is needed to ensure animal welfare needs are met, regardless of an owner's financial capacity. Owned animals are often caught up in disasters along with people, and veterinarians have an important role in disaster response and recovery activities.

In the absence of planning and assistance for the welfare of animals impacted by bushfires, the Victorian Government is not meeting the objectives of animal welfare being a shared community responsibility or acknowledging the importance of animals to people. This critical gap results in private veterinarians often taking on the financial responsibility of animal welfare for the public good.

What are your thoughts on the Strategy's approach to People and Community Safety?

Victoria's bushfire management strategy' outcome's indicators do not consider animal welfare and the impacts of disregarding animal welfare in disaster management on human well-being.

The AVA highlights the critical role that public awareness plays in ensuring animal welfare during disasters. There is a pressing need for increased government-funded public awareness campaigns specifically tailored towards animal disaster preparedness.

Preparedness is the first line of defence against the detrimental effects of disasters. By Governments investing in public awareness campaigns, we can equip livestock and pet owners with the knowledge and tools needed to safeguard their animals' wellbeing in the event of a disaster.

Such campaigns should focus on educating the public about the importance of creating disaster plans that include their animals, the value of microchipping and tagging for identification, evacuation arrangements, and knowledge what to do if their animal is injured or dies from the disaster. These measures can greatly assist in the event of a disaster and significantly reduce the pressures on emergency and veterinary services.

The AVA believes well promoted and expanded public awareness campaign will not only enhance the overall readiness of our community in times of disasters but also go a long way towards ensuring the welfare of domestic, commercial, and wild animals.

For example, the NSW Department of Primary Industries videos #getreadyanimals https://www.youtube.com/@NSWDPI_Ag/search?query=getreadyanimals%20



The AVA urges governments to consider increasing public awareness for animal disaster preparedness and response arrangements as an integral part of our nation's disaster risk reduction strategy.

What are your thoughts on the Strategy's approach to Ecosystem Resilience and Nature Conservation?

The AVA are advocating for all disaster impact reporting to include data on animal injuries and deaths. Current disaster reporting, including in Victoria's bushfire management strategy' frequently fails to account for the wide-ranging and devastating effects on animals, including livestock, companion animals, and wildlife, by omitting comprehensive statistics on animal injuries and fatalities.

This oversight in disaster reporting contributes to a systemic underestimation of the impacts on animals, leading to a lack of government and public awareness, and consequently, insufficient support. Such animal welfare information would provide a more accurate reflection of the disaster's impacts, thereby prompting a more suitable response from government, veterinarians, and the public.

What are your thoughts on the Strategy's approach to Working Together, Accountability and Shared Responsibility?

It's essential to urgently address animal welfare needs following a disaster such as bushfires and floods to prevent prolonged suffering. Veterinarians play an important role by assessing the requirements of animals needing veterinary care, including euthanasia of those severely injured, to ensure animal welfare needs are met. Veterinary hospitals are also important in reuniting companion animals with their owners, a well-accepted expectation of society.

Often the financial burden of a disaster response to treat impacted animals is imposed onto veterinarians, through community and government expectations. In instances where there is funding, it is often inadequate. For example, the Victorian Emergency Animal Welfare Plan (VEAWP) contributes to the management (by government agencies) of animal welfare during/following bushfires and acknowledges the AVA as the partner organisation with respect to harnessing private veterinarian's assistance in specific circumstances. However, the VEAWP parameters are limited, and private veterinary 'public good' response work frequently falls to veterinarians in bushfires and other emergencies. As a generality, cost associated with veterinary care of wildlife or displaced animals is often unable to be recouped by veterinarians, and emergency response and recovery strategies and arrangements need to provide support for this work.

To ensure veterinary services provided to disaster impacted animals is adequately funded, the AVA strongly believes that funding arrangements need to be recognised at a national level through the 'Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements' (DRFA) to assist state and territory arrangements and establish assistance measures for animal welfare.

The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) understands and appreciates the intent behind the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DRFA) as it provides a crucial cost-sharing framework between the Australian Government and State/Territory Governments, offering much-needed financial aid to individuals, businesses, and communities affected by disasters.

However, we have identified a significant shortcoming in its implementation in Victoria, particularly concerning animal welfare.



The Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DRFA) in its current form excludes explicit provisions for emergency veterinary care for disaster-impacted animals as a qualifying measure for relief and recovery assistance. This absence often leads to varied interpretations and applications across jurisdictions, creating a landscape of disparate support mechanisms for animal welfare during and after disasters. This inconsistency across jurisdictions creates confusion and uncertainty for veterinary professionals and pet owners alike. Without clear, readily available information about what the DRFA and Victorian disaster relief arrangements covers regarding animal welfare, individuals and organisations are often left in the dark, unsure of what support they can access or where they can seek help in disaster situations. For veterinary professionals, ambiguity around these funding arrangements can result in significant financial and operational challenges. For animal owners, the confusion can exacerbate the stress and anxiety already associated with disaster events. Ultimately, for the animals affected by these disasters, the consequence could be a delay in receiving essential care, potentially resulting in prolonged suffering.

To rectify these issues, the AVA recommends a revision of the DRFA and Victorian disaster relief arrangements to explicitly include provisions for emergency veterinary care for disaster-impacted animals. Further, clear, concise, and accessible information regarding these provisions must be made available to the public and relevant professionals to ensure all are adequately equipped to handle animal welfare during disasters. By standardising the interpretation and application of the DRFA across all jurisdictions including in Victoria, we can eliminate confusion, ensure consistency in animal welfare support, and ultimately, better protect the welfare of animals during times of disaster.

Are there any other actions or changes which you think are important to improve the mental and physical safety of firefighters?

The importance of animals to people in addition to the importance of animal welfare overall impacts the behaviour of people during bushfires particularly evacuation decisions. This puts both animal and human life at risk. Adequate disaster planning for animals such as companion animals and production animals is essential due to the strong relationships people have with animals and their responsibilities for animal welfare.

Including animals in disaster management plans is likely to reduce the risks to themselves and firefighters in times of emergency.

Is there any other feedback you'd like to provide?

Current disaster reporting frequently fails to account for the wide-ranging and devastating effects on animals, including livestock, companion animals, and wildlife, by omitting comprehensive statistics on animal injuries and fatalities.

This oversight in disaster reporting contributes to a systemic underestimation of the impacts on animals, leading to a lack of government and public awareness, and consequently, insufficient support.

While occasional disaster assessments do acknowledge the effects on animals, these instances are sporadic and lack a standardised approach.

For instance:

- The tragic loss of 11,000 farm animals in the 2009 Victorian Black Saturday fires.



- During the 2019-20 bushfires, thousands of New South Wales farms endured significant livestock losses, with over 11,000 animals sheltered at evacuation centres and animal safe places. The widespread devastation of these fires led to nearly 3 billion native animals being impacted across Australia.
- In the 2021 Western Australia Woorloo Bushfire, over 100 veterinarians and nurses dedicated six days to identify, assess, and care for affected animals alongside search and rescue officers.
- The 2022 New South Wales Northern Rivers Floods resulted in 3,403 calls to the NSW Agriculture and Animal Services hotline, with 2,011 requests for assistance.

The above examples demonstrate the profound effect disasters can have on animal populations, yet such figures are not consistently included in official disaster impact reports.

This lack of recognition hinders our collective understanding of the full scope of disaster impacts on animals and the associated support requirements.

Such animal welfare information would provide a more accurate reflection of the disaster's impacts, thereby prompting a more suitable response from government, veterinarians, and the public.

Of note, the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) are currently reviewing sections the 2018 DRFA. AVA made representations to NEMA and the Minister for Emergency Management calling for “emergency veterinary care for owned disaster impacted animals as an eligible measure for relief and recovery assistance in the revised DRFA” and for emergency management agencies to include in their reporting the number of livestock, companion animals and wildlife injured or dead as a result of the disaster.

Worth mentioning resulting from AVA representations, the Minister for Emergency Management has instructed NEMA to explore the development of a specific animal welfare assistance package that could include veterinary care activities and supports the AVA request for inclusion of animal loss and injury statistics in major incident reports.

Recommendations

1. The AVA recommends the following: All disaster impact reporting should include data on animal injuries and deaths.
2. Disaster planning should include considerations for animals and the impact of animals and animal welfare on people and communities.
3. Consideration for emergency service workers who may be put at additional risk due in times of evacuation due to the strong bonds the community has with animals and their desire to keep them safe in times of disaster.
4. Consideration for the need for the veterinary profession to be able to recoup the costs associated with delivering public good associated with animal care in disaster management. Lack of funding arrangements directly contributes to the financial instability of the veterinary profession through unsupported animal welfare obligations.

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