

## Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding

### **Australian Veterinary Association Responses to the Review's Set Questions**

#### **1. What experience have you had with Commonwealth disaster funding support?**

The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) is the national organisation representing veterinarians in Australia. The AVA consists of over 8500 members who come from all fields within the veterinary profession, including clinical veterinary practitioners work with companion animals, horses, farm animals (such as cattle and sheep), and wildlife; and government veterinarians who work with our animal health, public health, government emergency responses and quarantine systems.

Disasters pose significant threats not only to human lives but also to animals, both domestic and wild. In such circumstances, veterinarians and veterinary nurses play a pivotal role in disaster response, treating affected animals, and, when necessary, making informed decisions regarding euthanasia for severely injured creatures.

The current Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DRFA), a cost-sharing initiative between the Australian Government and State/Territory Governments, commendably aids individuals, businesses, and communities following disasters. However, a critical gap exists in its provisions, as it fails to include emergency veterinary care for disaster-affected animals as an eligible relief and recovery measure.

The consequences of this omission in DRFA have led to government support arrangements for disaster impacted animal welfare varying greatly across the jurisdictions, and often inadequate or non-existent. Despite the essential nature of these veterinary care services to disaster impacted animals, often the financial burden is relegated onto veterinary private practice.

While it is the responsibility of pet and livestock owners to ensure the welfare of their animals during disasters, assistance is frequently required, often beyond the owner's financial capacity. This situation frequently obliges veterinarians to shoulder the financial weight of disaster response for treating both owned and wildlife animals. This obligation is not only imposed by community and government expectations, legislative regulations but is also rooted in their veterinary professional ethics and codes of conduct. Funding of these expectations is currently inadequate, such that veterinary care is often provided by veterinarians out of their own pocket or at reduced cost. (Noting, the levels of financial burden and supports vary greatly across jurisdictions)

To ensure animal welfare is sufficiently supported, the AVA strongly believes that arrangements for veterinary services to disaster impacted animals needs to be clearly recognised at a national level through the DRFA to assist state and territory arrangements and establish assistance measures. This will ensure the provision of necessary veterinary services in disaster-stricken regions, safeguarding animal welfare and reducing the financial strain on private veterinary businesses. This inclusion is crucial for the overall resilience of our nation in the face of future natural disasters.

#### **2. How could Commonwealth funding support communities to reduce their disaster risk?**

At least 69 percent of Australians households own one or more pet 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.

The Australian Veterinary Association (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. 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. Moreover, wildlife is often the forgotten victim in disaster situations. A public awareness campaign could help highlight the role citizens can play in protecting local wildlife, including understanding how to respond if they come across an injured wild animal in a disaster response.

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](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.

### **3. Please describe your understanding of Commonwealth disaster funding processes.**

The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) understand and appreciate 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, particularly concerning animal welfare.

Individuals working within the emergency management sector typically have a sound understanding of the DRFA and its applicability. However, for the broader community, including veterinarians, animal owners and the general public, the intricacies of these arrangements can be confusing and opaque. This lack of clarity often leads to uncertainty during crisis times, when clear and accessible information is most critically needed.

### **4. Are the funding roles of the Commonwealth, states and territories, and local government, during disaster events clear?**

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 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 Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) recommends a revision of the DRFA 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, we can eliminate confusion, ensure consistency in animal welfare support, and ultimately, better protect the welfare of animals during times of disaster.

## **5. Is there any further information you would 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 Wooroloo 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 and the associated support requirements.

To rectify this, the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) suggests all disaster impact reporting should include data on animal injuries and deaths. 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.