

Advice from Wildlife Health Australia (WHA) for Enhancing Australia's Native Wildlife Bushfire Response

Background

The unprecedented bushfire season of 2019-2020 in Australia has reportedly caused the estimated loss of 1.25 billion animals and 130 threatened ecological communities. Throughout the season wildlife carers and wildlife veterinarians actively wishing to assist in the management of wildlife welfare arising from the fires worked in an environment of varying or absent coordination and management, standards and practices or supporting documentation. This has impacted on the opportunities to provide appropriate care and to manage the welfare of native wildlife. The longer-term outcomes of these actions for native wildlife should aim to maintain stable natural environments and their biodiversity.

The outcome of various reviews and debriefs of the recent bushfire season is that there is an immediate need to enhance native wildlife health preparedness for the next and future bushfire seasons. High priority opportunities to enhance preparedness are recommended here and are primarily aimed at native wildlife welfare and the sustainability of the wildlife in their natural environment – the environment and biodiversity. The activities should target wildlife carers and wildlife veterinarians working with government agencies to manage wildlife welfare issues following a bushfire.

The weaknesses and gaps

- Lack of relevant and consistent documentation such as national standards, policies, protocols, and management systems and training that is applicable to and for the on-ground cadre of wildlife responders to native wildlife affected by bushfires.
- Varying levels of coordination and planning for the native wildlife affected by bushfires across the various jurisdictions and State based agencies.
- Need for integration of wildlife emergency response with an all hazards approach within emergency management. The immediate priority within an all hazards approach is for the natural hazards, specifically for bushfires.

The opportunities and what needs to be done

During the next two years preparedness activities to support predictable and sustainable responses for affected native wildlife ready for the next and future bushfire seasons should include:

- Commencing as soon as practical develop and validate documentation including standards, policies, procedures, and management systems that are specifically relevant to wildlife responders.
 - The development should acknowledge and use relevant pre-existing documentation and systems.
 - Working drafts would need to be completed and available within 12 months, with final versions delivered in the following 12 months.
- Working with fire response and wildlife agencies across the various jurisdictions, integrate wildlife welfare response as a standard component of their response arrangements and develop a nationally accredited training program for wildlife responders to operate in an incident response

(emergency management arrangements, working in an emergency operations centre, incident control system).

- Utilising and building on existing training programs within emergency response agencies, the first intake should commence as soon as practical with the aim to have an initial cadre of key wildlife responders training in incident control systems completed within 6 to 8 months.
 - Subsequent intakes with completion of training should occur over the next year with completion of development of an accredited program within two years.
- Development of a nationally coordinated and consistent community led component of emergency response of wildlife responders that will integrate into the emergency management arrangements of each jurisdiction.
 - The framework should be completed within 12 months and be operational in the subsequent 12 months.
 - Monitoring and evaluation is required and testing to validate the relevance and operational usefulness of the outcomes from the other activities should be completed during the second 12 months of the two years.

The key parties and responsibilities

Partners and stakeholders should include at least the following representation for each preparedness activity:

- Standards and protocols
 - Relevant environmental agencies in each jurisdiction
 - Australian Veterinary Association (AVA), Wildlife Disease Association Australasia (WDAA) and Zoo and Aquarium Association (ZAA)
 - Wildlife care groups and environment management agencies (government land managers) for supporting care and immediate relief of affected wildlife
 - University veterinary and other relevant schools.
- Integration of wildlife welfare into emergency response structures and arrangements
 - States and territories including environment agencies and emergency management agencies
 - Procedural / job specific experts.
- Development of a nationally coordinated and consistent community led emergency response that will integrate into each jurisdiction's emergency management arrangements
 - Relevant State based jurisdictions
 - Relevant wildlife veterinary, carer and animal welfare groups
 - Registered training authorities.

The need for national coordination

For each activity, and activities overall, national coordination is required.