

Replies to Questions from the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements Directed to Wildlife Health Australia (NTG-HB3-663)

1. Describe, at a high level, the role and responsibilities of Wildlife Health Australia. In your response, outline its membership, any responsibilities relating to natural disasters and whether Wildlife Health Australia has any defined responsibilities in emergency management arrangements, including within local, jurisdictional or national emergency management or recovery plans.

[Wildlife Health Australia](#) (WHA) is the peak coordinating body for wildlife health in Australia. WHA provides Australia's focal point for wildlife health and representative to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature Veterinary Specialist Group.

Its mission is to lead national action on wildlife health including welfare to protect and enhance the natural environment, biodiversity, economy and animal and human health through strong partnerships. WHA assists Australian governments as the central part of our national wildlife health system and is trusted by government and non-government stakeholders.

WHA reports to the Agriculture Senior Officials Committee (AGSOC) via the Animal Health Committee and the National Biosecurity Committee and has observer status on the Environment and Invasives Committee and the Consultative Committee for Emergency Animal Diseases. WHA is custodian of the [National Emergency Wildlife Disease Response Guidelines](#).

WHA leads and manages national committees such as the National Avian Influenza Wild Bird (NAIWB) Steering Group and the Bat Health Focus Group for matters relating to wildlife health. Membership of these committees are from across all Australian jurisdictions and from both government and non-government organisations.

WHA has 40 member organisations and over 750 individual members. WHA membership operates as a network that includes government agencies including the environment, and agriculture and /or primary industries and partners from the non-government partners including universities, zoos and aquariums, private veterinarians and licenced / registered wildlife carers who are usually volunteers. WHA works with up to 120 different government and non-government agencies and organisations on a regular basis and WHA members are invariably requested to assist with any wildlife emergency occurring within Australia be it fire, flood, drought, disease or oil spill response. This did occur during the bushfires of 2019-2020.

WHA has a strong One Health focus. Through our initiatives and activities WHA links the environment, animal health and public health sectors, government and non-government organisations. WHA seeks, collects, collates and disseminates information on wildlife health from across Australia through our programs and projects.

WHA links, informs and supports agencies and organisations who work with or have an interest and responsibility for wildlife health and provide leadership, coordination, technical advice, facilitation, communications and professional support. Our members form a network of government and private stakeholders to help better manage wildlife health and its potential impact on Australia's environment, biodiversity, animal and human health, trade and tourism.

During health and disease emergencies involving or likely to wildlife, our role is one of leadership and management of communication, coordination, linkage and the provision of technical information to assist lead jurisdictional response agencies at local, jurisdictional and national

levels and stakeholders. We work to ensure that jurisdictional response agencies are well supported and information relating to wildlife is coordinated throughout the response and recovery.

WHA does not have any defined responsibilities in emergency management arrangements, including within local, jurisdictional or national emergency management or recovery plans. WHA was not formally activated during the bushfires of 2019-2020.

However, WHA during the fire season WHA was approached by jurisdictions, response organisations and members seeking a range of technical and scientific advice on wildlife. WHA responded to these as appropriate and led the development of supplementary feeding guidelines. In addition, WHA members were actively involved with wildlife impacted by the bushfire emergency across within Australia.

2. Describe any issues or deficiencies that Wildlife Health Australia has observed in relation to the emergency wildlife response and recovery during and following the 2019/2020 bushfires, including within existing emergency management arrangements, guidelines, protocols, training and the use of volunteers.

The 2019/20 fire season has provided a unique opportunity for emergency response arrangements related to wildlife to be utilised and for issues and areas of improvement to be identified. The WHA board has considered this in depth and has developed the *National Preparedness for Emergency Response to Wildlife Affected by Bushfire – Gaps and Activities in response*.

Identified issues and deficiencies include:

- An absence of agreed national standards and documentation for rehabilitation and veterinary assessment, treatment and care for wildlife including policy, standards and protocols.
- A lack of relevant and consistent documentation including: protocols for deployment of wildlife carers and wildlife professionals; policies including those for insurances such as professional and public liability and workers compensation, access to fire control centres and fire grounds; training materials including those specific to wildlife care and treatment, and; guidelines and technical references for wildlife carers and professional. This documentation is needed for both the on-ground cadre of wildlife responders and the managers of those responders.
- Absent documentation included guidance on the handling of wildlife for fire personnel or similar to ensure any proposed actions take account of animal welfare, zoonotic disease risk and biosecurity risks.
- A lack of or inadequate understanding of emergency management arrangements and structures by wildlife responders and their managers. It is particularly important that wildlife responders understand where they fit in the overall response arrangements and structures and what the priorities of the emergency managers.
- Managers of the bushfire responses did not always understand the arrangements relating to bushfire affected wildlife, and the resources that could be made available to support the immediate and subsequent care of the wildlife.

- The training and use of wildlife carer volunteers was not always to a consistent standard. The training of spontaneous volunteers (volunteered at the time) was variable. There appeared to be varying levels of coordination and planning for the training and use of volunteers from across the various jurisdictions and State based agencies. Wildlife carers were keen to volunteer but there did not appear to be a clear pathway or guide that shows them how to volunteer safely and effectively.
- Though the immediate need now is bushfires, there is a bigger issue of how wildlife carers and first responders for wildlife can be trained, mobilised and managed within an all-hazards-type framework to support the work of our response agencies.

There was a need for the national coordination of wildlife carers and professionals and their relevant resources that may be either WHA members or resources managed by a jurisdiction. The members and their resources needed a central hub to facilitate the meeting of the needs across Australia. Where the fire agencies have the National Resource Sharing Centre (NRSC), there is no equivalent for those involved with wildlife. This coordination hub would also be a key focus for the collection, collation and dissemination of information to the WHA members, and in so doing encourage active appropriate and targeted support to the jurisdictions.

WHA does not have the authority to formally take on the role for national coordination.

3. Describe any work undertaken by Wildlife Health Australia during and following the 2019/2020 bushfires, including any efforts to improve the national coordination of emergency wildlife response and recovery following natural disasters.

During and since the recent fire season, WHA has undertaken to respond to strategic wildlife issues arising from the fires. These requests were consistent from across agencies, jurisdictions and community groups seeking factual and science based information. This work covered a range of facets including:

- *Documentation development*
WHA took the lead to manage the development of documentation to meet some of the immediate needs of those dealing with the wildlife affected by the bushfires. This included:
 - *The **National food and feeding (“provisioning”) guidelines for wildlife*** came as a result of leadership by WHA. This was to assist the different state response agencies. Most jurisdictions had policies in place that discourage supplementary feeding of free-ranging wildlife because of the potential adverse effects such as direct effects on animal health and behavioural modification and dependency. The bushfires destroyed large areas of habitat that made it difficult for free-ranging wildlife to access the normal sources of food and water both during and after the fires. Governments came under pressure during the response to provide surviving animals with food and water. Different approaches were initially taken across the jurisdictions. There was a need across the jurisdictions for a more consistent, harmonised approach that was founded on expert advice. The guidelines provided advice on what to feed and what not to feed free ranging wildlife affected by the bushfires. The guidelines were available to governments for their use during the response.
 - The WHA fact sheets produced for various aspects of wildlife health were extended to provide guidance on feeding for affected wildlife. A key need was in the feeding of free-ranging wildlife. WHA extended the guidelines to assist the jurisdictions in addressing feeding of wildlife during bushfires.
 - WHA led a focus group of key senior operational wildlife environmental contacts in each jurisdiction. The focus group members were the pre-existing WHA

Environment Representatives Group. The group was supportive of WHA leading the work to form a harmonised national approach.

- WHA throughout the bushfire crisis was an informal hub for the collection and collation and sharing of information on the extent of support / activities being undertaken in jurisdictions by WHA members. Whilst not fully structured and systematic it went some way to meeting the needs of WHA members. This activity assisting in informing the way forward around several immediate needs in addition to strategic planning into the future.
- *Strategic thinking and advice to government*
 - A WHA board-led task group of experts in care for bushfire affected wildlife and managers for wildlife care was formed to identify priorities that the wildlife health community would put in place to improve our preparedness and response to future bushfire impacts on wildlife. The report and recommendations from that group are attached (***National Preparedness for Emergency Response to Wildlife Affected by Bushfire – Gaps and Activities Required***).
 - The report benefited from input from key WHA focus group members located in biosecurity and environment agencies in all states and territories of Australia. Further key input was provided by the main wildlife health responders involved in the 2019-20 fires. This was part of a dedicated WHA Wildlife Health Partners' Forum convened by WHA in July 2020. Guidance on the development of the report and recommendations was provided by a small number of experts with fire and wildlife emergency response experience.
- *Communication*
 - WHA has kept the Department of Agriculture, Water and Environment Bushfires Recovery Task Group (the Department) informed of developments and activities for preparedness and response by the non-government wildlife health organisations including WHA members. This included the activities described previously including the guidelines for feeding wildlife. WHA has provide advice on preparedness activities being planned by Animals Australia, Morris Animal Foundation, Taronga Conservation Society Australia, RSPCA, and Zoos Victoria.
 - Arising from WHA's international exposure, advice has also been provided to the Department on enquiries received from overseas agencies seeking advice regarding where to send donations to support response and recovery for wildlife.

4. Describe any opportunities that Wildlife Health Australia has identified to improve emergency wildlife response and recovery following a natural disaster.

The WHA board has proactively undertaken discussion and consideration of opportunities that it has identified for improved wildlife outcomes during emergencies. This is detailed in the attached document *National Preparedness for Emergency Response to Wildlife Affected by Bushfire – Gaps and Activities required*. There is a clear opportunity to use the bushfires to facilitate development of an all-hazards-type approach to organise wildlife responders such that they can be available to assist if needed for any wildlife emergency or incident involving wildlife. (See "5. Future activities on page 10 of the attached document.)

Opportunities or priority activities that have been identified are:

- Development of national standards and documentation for rehabilitation and veterinary assessment, treatment and care for wildlife including policy, standards and protocols. These

would then form basis for nationally consistent training so that they support an effective and timely emergency response (e.g. national wildlife triage guidelines, burns treatment etc.).

- Working with relevant jurisdictions, undertake the identification and training by others of key individuals / organisations and an on-ground cadre of wildlife responders in incident response:
 - Integration of wildlife welfare activities within the government led response is critical for success
 - It is particularly important that wildlife responders understand where they fit in the overall response and what the emergency services' priorities are.
Work with jurisdictions who licence carers etc.
- Development of a coordinated and consistent national component of emergency response that could integrate wildlife responders into the emergency management arrangements of each jurisdiction is an important longer term objective and opportunity and would require considerable work.
- Undertake engagement with emergency management agencies to embed wildlife response activities as part of response as soon as practical and safe to do so.

To be successful, this work would need to be led nationally and supported by the relevant jurisdictions. Current arrangements for national emergency management coordination could be considered as models.

5. Describe any national or jurisdictional arrangements that Wildlife Health Australia has established or participates in for the purposes of coordinating emergency wildlife response and recovery.

As outlined in Question 1, WHA has a range of roles and responsibilities for coordinating emergency wildlife response and recovery. Historically these have been focused on diseases that affect wildlife health. Reflecting this WHA worked with stakeholders to develop the [National Emergency Wildlife Disease Response Guidelines](#). These Guidelines inform the national response to an emergency wildlife disease in native Australian wildlife. The Guidelines were developed and validated in consultation with WHA members and the jurisdictions to ensure their understanding and support.

The Guidelines are part of a wide range of documentation for wildlife that WHA has led the development of and maintains in the national interest. This documentation continues to be expanded through the various committees and WHA members.

WHA operates at the national level including observer status on the national Animal Health Committee and the national Consultative Committee for Emergency Animal Diseases (CCEAD), national Environment and Invasives Committee, and the National Biosecurity Engagement and Communications Network. In these committees WHA provides a view from the wildlife community on relevant issues such as in the area of biosecurity preparedness rather than response and or recovery for the natural hazards. Examples of this include feedback and comment on arrangements such as the National Environmental Biosecurity Response Agreement (NEBRA) or provision of recommendations for wildlife to the National Biosecurity Emergency Preparedness Expert Group (NBEPEG). WHA works closely with colleagues at Animal Health Australia to provide input into Australia's veterinary emergency plan (AUSVETPLAN) and the conduct of training exercises relevant to wildlife.

With regard to response, the WHA representation in CCEAD provides the opportunity for technical advice and guidance as it relates to wildlife during a national response to an emergency animal disease. The provision of such advice has become increasingly important with One Health underpinning the approach to disease management for animals, humans and wildlife.

Whilst WHA does not have any defined responsibilities in the local, jurisdictional and national emergency management arrangements, we assist response agencies and stakeholders with communication, coordination, linkage and the provision of technical information to assist the response. In doing so, we work to ensure that response agencies are well supported and that people and information are coordinated throughout the response, with the overarching aim of improved wildlife welfare outcomes.

WHA is an active player at national and jurisdictional levels during responses and for diseases of animals including wildlife and investigations of unusual and significant mortalities in wildlife. Though not established for the purposes of coordinating emergency wildlife response and recovery, WHA is trusted by both government and non-government alike and maintains a national network of non-government organisations, wildlife carers and professionals with an interest and need for information on wildlife health including veterinarians, zoos, universities, government and non-government agencies and organisations, and the public. WHA has a demonstrated ability to lead where matters relating to wildlife health including wildlife welfare area priority. WHA provides a foundation for ongoing activities for preparedness, response and recovery in the wildlife area.

Attachments: *National Preparedness for Emergency Response to Wildlife Affected by Bushfire – Gaps and Activities Required* – Separate electronic file (NTG HB3 663 Attachment National Preparedness for Emergency Response to Wildlife Affected by Bushfire FINAL).