

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 loss of 1.25 billion animals and 130 threatened ecological communities. Throughout the season wildlife carers and wildlife veterinarians worked in the absence of appropriate and adequate coordination, supporting documentation and management systems to provide opportunities to save native wildlife and manage the animal 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 who are likely to be the first responders for wildlife following a bushfire.

The weaknesses and gaps

- Lack of relevant documentation such as 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.
- Absence of national and state / territory coordination and planning for the native wildlife affected by bushfires.
- 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 of 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 need to be completed and available within 12 months, with final versions delivered in the following 12 months.
- Identification and training of a key, on-ground cadre of wildlife responders to operate in an incident response (emergency management arrangements, working in an emergency operations centre, incident control system), commencing with the first intake as soon as practical with completion within 6 to 8 months. Subsequent intakes with completion of training should occur over the next year.
- 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.
- An exercise(s) to validate the relevance and operational usefulness of the outcomes from the other activities. This should be completed during the second 12 months of the two years.

The key parties and responsibilities

Wildlife Health Australia should be tasked with taking the overall lead and have responsibility for the delivery of the preparedness activities. This allocation of responsibility is the same as it has been and would be for Plant Health Australia, Animal Health Australia and the Australian Maritime Safety Authority.

Wildlife Health Australia has the existing connectivity and relationships with a wide range of stakeholders and partners that are likely to be responders for native wildlife affected by a natural disaster such as a bushfire.

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

- Standards and protocols
 - Wildlife Disease Association Australasia (WDAA), Zoo and Aquarium Association (ZAA) and Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) with coordination, curation and project management provided by Wildlife Health Australia for treatment and management of wildlife
 - Carers groups and environment management agencies (government land managers) for supporting care and immediate relief of affected wildlife
 - University veterinary and other relevant schools.
- Training of key, on-ground cadre of wildlife responders
 - States and territories including environment agencies and emergency management agencies with support from Wildlife Health Australia
 - Procedure / job specific experts.
- Development of a nationally coordinated and consistent community led emergency response that will integrate into each jurisdiction's emergency management arrangements
 - Commonwealth including Depts of Environment and Agriculture and Water
 - Associations such as the WDAA and ZAA, AVA, wildlife carer groups, Vets Beyond Borders (VBB), South Australian Veterinary Emergency Management (SAVEM), state / territory partners including environment agencies.

Bushfires are one of many hazards for native wildlife in Australia. Once the needs for bushfire preparedness are in place, further preparedness activities should be considered to look at future proofing Australia in the area of wildlife health emergency preparedness and response on an all hazards basis.

About Wildlife Health Australia (WHA)

Wildlife Health Australia is a nonprofit, membership organisation consisting of the people and organisations that champion wildlife health in Australia. The WHA network includes 45 agencies and organisations and over 800 members. Its mission is to lead national action on wildlife health 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.

WHA has close relationships with all Australian governments, is trusted by government and non-government stakeholders and is well positioned to assist. It has the track record, relationships and connections to be able to identify priorities and work with partners, stakeholders and the public to help Australian governments address this gap area in Australia's emergency response arrangements.

A management committee, chaired by an appointee of the Australian government, provides leadership and a small number of dedicated staff steward, facilitate and coordinate the trust-based relationships and collaborations needed to help manage the adverse effects of wildlife diseases on Australia's environment, biodiversity, animal and human health, trade and tourism. This is achieved by generating norms and standards for monitoring, surveillance, and on-ground action, as well as facilitating the development of capacity, tools and resources which improve wildlife health in the areas of surveillance and investigation, research and knowledge, communications and outreach, education and training. WHA members are invariably requested to assist with any wildlife emergency occurring within Australia be it fire, flood, drought, disease or oil spill response and most recently, WHA has worked with partners to focus on preparedness and response in the biosecurity area of emergency management for example through development of [National Emergency Wildlife Disease Response Guidelines](#) and, in partnership with the states and territories, running regular scenario-based emergency response exercises with its different communities of interest (e.g. zoo-based veterinarians and the Zoo and Aquarium Association, state and territory-based wildlife coordinators, members of the Bat Health Focus Group, Universities Focus Group, the Australian Veterinary Association and key members such as the Wildlife Diseases Association Australasia).

WHA reports to AGSOC via the Animal Health Committee and the National Biosecurity Committee and has observer status on the Environment and Invasives Committee. WHA provides Australia's focal point for wildlife health and representative to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature Veterinary Specialist Group.