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ON CALL TO HELP
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SUBMISSION: INDEPENDENT
INQUIRY INTO 2019-20
VICTORIAN FIRE SEASON

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Wildlife Victoria Inc.

Animal welfare response

While the emergency animal welfare needs of domestic and agricultural animals appears to be dealt with urgently and systematically during and after major fires, the response to affected wildlife seems by comparison to be late and limited. Notwithstanding the additional challenges of wildlife being less visible and accessible, the community expects a proportionate response to reduce suffering and provide care to injured animals.

The range of responses in the 2019-20 fires as reported by DELWP (February Newsletter)¹ included:

- Wildlife Assessment Teams (WAT) deployed across fire-impacted areas
- Wildlife triage units at Mallacoota, Bairnsdale and Corryong
- Aerial Food Drops for specific fire-affected wildlife including the threatened brush-tailed rock wallaby
- Koalas assessed and moved to areas not impacted by fire

At a briefing on Jan 29th for animal welfare agencies (WV, Animals Australia, Australia Veterinary Association) arranged by Minister D'Ambrosio's office and DELWP, it was advised that there were only 2-3 teams per ICC, and that these teams were only working alongside road clearing teams.

Data relating to animal welfare was provided by DELWP to relevant agencies.²

Field teams were operating from:

- Heywood ICC from 30th Dec
- Mallacoota triage from 5th Jan, field team from 8th Jan
- Orbost ICC from 8th Jan
- Hume (Corryong) ICC: field team from 11th Jan; triage from 13th Jan
- Bairnsdale ICC from 12th Jan

The Mallacoota triage was set up on 5th January. It saw 113 animals, 39 of which were euthanised, 40 released, 16 transported to Melbourne Zoo and 10 went to a wildlife carer. A further 165 kangaroos were located and euthanised by Vets for Compassion. Many fire-affected macropods were only able to be assessed after food was put out on the local golf course to attract the animals. None of these animals would have been detected by the relatively static DELWP/Zoos Victoria triage.

It highlights the need for mobile and highly skilled vets/darters proactively searching for fire affected animals and suggests that there is a role for non-government groups in the response to wildlife affected by fire.

Statistics from the other triage units are as follows:

- The triage unit at Bairnsdale ran from 8th Jan to 2nd February. Over a 4 week period, of 371 animals were reported, 46 animals were presented to the triage unit and 24 were euthanised. Of 135 kangaroos observed, 6 were euthanised.
- From the Orbost ICC 343 animals were observed and 7 euthanised. Of 234 Kangaroos observed, none were euthanised.
- From the Hume ICC 445 animals were observed and of these 7 were euthanised. Of 269 kangaroos observed 3 were euthanised.

¹ DELWP. Victoria's Bushfire Emergency: Biodiversity Response and Recovery. Monthly Newsletter February 2020

² DELWP Animal welfare data and information. As at 31/01/2020

- The Heywood ICC (Budj Bim fire) was the only ICC to involve a single accredited wildlife volunteer with expertise and experience with koalas. Ninety animals were reported to be euthanised.

The number of animals seen at triage centres was low. Seventy five percent of animals triaged were koalas. Notwithstanding the very intense fires that resulted in a high death toll on native wildlife, the very limited active searching for fire affected wildlife has also contributed to this low discovery rate.

Where there was active searching for animals by Vets for Compassion team in Mallacoota, many more animals were assisted than would otherwise have been the case, and this highlights the value of suitably equipped, trained and deployed wildlife vets and darters. In Mallacoota, local wildlife rescuers and community members also played a large role in locating animals in need of assessment and care.

The experience of the people searching for fire affected animals is central to the effectiveness of the search. Experienced wildlife rescuers can handle animals with confidence and effectiveness and minimise stress to the animal. Inexperienced wildlife rescuers are likely to miss many animals, and not be able to confidently interpret animal behaviour. In one situation reported to us, an experienced koala “spotter” counted 47 koalas in an area that inexperienced observers detected only a few animals.

For safety reasons, Wildlife Assessment Teams were deployed largely with tree clearing operations. The figures for macropods are evidence that these teams had only two options – to “observe” the animal and leave it alone, or to euthanise animals with obvious injuries. The absence of a darter/vet on the team means that none of these animals were adequately assessed prior to a decision being made. As a result, it is possible that some animals euthanised were viable, and highly likely that many animals simply “observed” may have had injuries that required treatment.

The personnel working in the WATs no doubt worked long and difficult days and their efforts to alleviate the suffering of fire affected wildlife is appreciated. However, the data from the 2019-20 fire seasons suggests that the overall response was inadequate.

Elements that should be considered for future WATs are:

- Team composition – must include a vet and darter
- Training and experience – fire response; animal handling
- Equipment – standardised wildlife rescue and transport equipment
- Number of teams - relevant to fire area, habitat, terrain

The Victorian Response Plan for Wildlife Impacted by Fire

The 2018 Victorian Response Plan for Wildlife Impacted by Fire³ was not implemented over two fire seasons. In 2018 training of invited wildlife volunteers occurred, and volunteers were provided with grants for PPE. However, in two consecutive fire seasons, almost none of the trained volunteers were invited to be part of the response and communication with the volunteers was inadequate. The volunteer sector expects and deserves clearly communicated messages about their role, if any. The current situation of uncertainty, and unmet expectations, is detrimental to the wildlife volunteer sector and undermines public confidence in the Departments' operations in this space.

Supplemental water and food for wildlife

During and after the bushfire crisis, there were widespread concerns that wildlife that survived the fires would require supplemental water and food until natural resources recovered. Following community pressure, and a precedent in NSW, DELWP undertook aerial drops of food to known habitat of threatened brush-tailed rock wallabies.⁴ Some actions, such as the dropping of macropod pellets from the air, are unlikely to have delivered any meaningful food to wildlife. Overall, the response was reactive and not well planned or communicated.

After the fires, various community groups and individuals undertook supplemental water and food drops in affected areas, mainly on private property. Some of these efforts were judicious and careful, while in other cases the known risks of supplemental feeding may not have been avoided.

During the fires, a group convened by Animal Health Australia contributed to a definitive set of guidelines for assisting wildlife during and after bushfires. This information (publicly available on the NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment website) could inform the development of a formal plan for future fires in Victoria.

³ Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (2018). *Victorian Response Plan for Wildlife Impacted by Fire*. The State of Victoria

⁴ Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (2020). *Animal welfare data and information*. As at 31/01/2020. Power Point Presentation.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: That wildlife rescue volunteers either be systematically trained, equipped and included in the response to wildlife, OR a clear policy decision be made and communicated that there is no role for wildlife rescue volunteers.

Recommendation 2: That the position of State Controller Wildlife be made at the earliest possible stage of every major bushfire.

Recommendation 3: That Wildlife Assessment Teams (WATs) include a vet and a darter (can be the same person) to ensure that injured wildlife is competently assessed and all options are available (euthanasia, sedation for assessment, immediate release, immediate treatment, transport to an authorised person/facility for further assessment, treatment or care).

Recommendation 4: That WATs are suitably trained and equipped for their role.

Recommendation 5: That WATs work systematically on the periphery of firegrounds as well as with road clearing crews, to search for fire affected wildlife.

Recommendation 6: That wildlife triage stations with suitably trained veterinary staff be established at all base camps, with fire crews able to deliver fire affected wildlife directly to these stations.

Recommendation 7: In addition to the RSPCA and Zoos Victoria, other organisations - such as Wildlife Victoria, Animals Australia, Vets for Compassion, Vets Without Borders – should have a formal role in the response to wildlife welfare during and following a major bushfire. This would considerably increase the response capacity and provide the community with greater assurance that fire-affected wildlife is being actively detected and cared for.

Recommendation 8: That a plan for delivering supplemental water and feed for fire-affected wildlife be developed in readiness for the next fire season and include the involvement of landholders and wildlife groups.

Bibliography

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