

Wildlife response in bushfires: lessons from Australia's 2019–20 summer

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The bushfires in Australia over the summer of 2019–20 were unprecedented and tested systems and stretched resources like never before. The NSW Government's \$1 million bushfire relief for wildlife rehabilitators program supports wildlife rehabilitators and the veterinary sector to recover from bushfires and prepare for future extreme events.

Established in November 2019 and funded through the Environmental Trust, the wildlife rehabilitators program covers 3 streams: grants to wildlife rehabilitators, coordination and capability for wildlife response in bushfires and access to veterinary services for wildlife in emergencies.

The NSW Bushfire Inquiry¹ and the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements² gave significant consideration to wildlife response following the Australian bushfires. Key themes included incorporating wildlife response and recovery into emergency management, integrating non-government agencies into emergency response for wildlife and training for firefighters in wildlife response and for wildlife responders in bushfire awareness and incident management.

Current initiatives include preparing a wildlife response plan under NSW emergency management arrangements, establishing a technical advisor (wildlife) role in incident management teams, developing wildlife first response training for firefighters, establishing wildlife emergency response taskforces and trialling a televet service for wildlife. These projects are being delivered with consideration of feedback provided through after-action reviews, including a survey of wildlife rehabilitators and the veterinary sector and in collaboration with the wildlife rehabilitation, veterinary, firefighting and emergency management sectors.

Wildlife first response training will be available to NSW firefighters from August 2021. Taronga Conservation Society has been engaged to develop 2-hour online training to build firefighter capability to assess, report and assist wildlife encountered on firegrounds. It includes basic information on safe capture, containment and transport of wildlife without compromising the safety and effectiveness of firefighting operations. A role summary and checklist

for the Technical Advisor (wildlife) will be available from July 2021. This role has been trialled in prescribed burns across spring and autumn of 2020–21.

Wildlife-capable vets are being connected with wildlife rehabilitators, general practice vets and emergency responders via the Phone-A-Vet app as part of the televet trial for wildlife.

Standard operating procedures and role summaries for wildlife emergency response taskforces, including authorisation requirements for shooters and darters, will be available from July 2021. Bushfire awareness training has been provided for over 200 wildlife rehabilitators and veterinary practitioners who expressed interest in participating in taskforces. The Worldwide Veterinary Service platform and app is being tested for application in wildlife response.

Collaborating from the outset has provided improved animal welfare and conservation outcomes for wildlife. The funding for this work, in response to recommendation 53 of the NSW Bushfire Inquiry, will provide the refined plans, tools and resources to be shared, practised and understood, ready for the next extreme event in NSW.

Endnotes

1. New South Wales Government 2020, *Final Report of the NSW Bushfire Inquiry*, 31 July 2020, pp.322–325. At: www.dpc.nsw.gov.au/assets/dpc-nsw-gov-au/publications/NSW-Bushfire-Inquiry-1630/Final-Report-of-the-NSW-Bushfire-Inquiry.pdf [16 November 2020].

2. Commonwealth of Australia 2020, *Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements Report*, 28 October 2020, pp.355–361. At: <https://naturaldisaster.royalcommission.gov.au/> [16 November 2020].