

Your details

Ms

Title

First name

Sonja

Last name

Elwood

Submission details

I am making this submission as

Other

Submission type

I am submitting on behalf of my organisation

Organisation making the submission (if applicable)

NSW Wildlife Council (NWC)

Your position in the organisation (if applicable)

Media Officer / Exec. Member

Consent to make submission public

I give my consent for this submission to be made public

Share your experience or tell your story

Your story

My name is Sonja Elwood (B. Env. Sci., M. Wildlife Mgmt., M. Res (Sci)) and I am making this submission on behalf of the New South Wales Wildlife Council (NWC). I am an executive member of the NWC. I also represent Sydney Wildlife on the NWC.

The NWC is the peak body for wildlife rehabilitation in NSW and represents 26 licensed wildlife rescue groups across the state. Our combined membership totals approximately 4,000 volunteers

or just over 50% of all licensed wildlife carers in the state. Our network operates 24/7, almost entirely voluntarily with no paid staff and is funded solely by community donations.
<https://www.nwc.org.au/resources/injured-wildlife-find-your-nearest-rescue-group/>

The 2019/2020 Black Summer fires may be extinguished, but the wildlife emergency is far from over and the next fire season is already looming. The current Covid-19 crisis has further delayed essential recovery and rehabilitation of both wildlife and the rescuers. Despite this, we must take every opportunity to prepare for the next inevitable bushfire emergency, and we welcome the chance to submit our experiences and recommendations to the Bushfire Inquiry.

Our wildlife is unique – from the iconic koala to the enigmatic platypus, Australia's fauna is priceless to Australians and the wider global community beyond the tourist dollars. Never was this more evident than during the 2019/2020 bushfire season when media images of scorched forests and harrowing scenes of dead or dying wildlife brought an influx of donations (to certain organisations) and offers of help from all over the world. In Australia, The Backyard Barometer research published by the World Wildlife Fund in 2018 (<https://www.wwf.org.au/ArticleDocuments/353/pub-summary-backyard-barometer-australian-attitudes-to-nature-23may18.pdf.aspx?Embed=Y>) found that "82% [of Australians] say they are worried about future generations growing up with less access to nature and wildlife. More than three-quarters (77%) would like to see more native wildlife and thriving nature in their local area, and 73% would like to have more national parks and nature reserves."

Following closely behind the courageous firefighters on the frontline of those apocalyptic Black Summer fires, were wildlife carers - ordinary people with extraordinary skills garnered on both formal training and vast experience. According to the University of Sydney, 1.25 billion wild animals perished in those fires, 800 million of them in NSW. In the face of the suffering and colossal loss of wildlife, rescuers applied Herculean effort to help as many animals as possible, aided by contributions from expert teams from voluntary animal emergency response organisations, veterinarians, universities and charities in Australia and overseas. During this unparalleled time, our wildlife rescuers were coping with their own evacuations, losses, and some were in mortal danger, and yet they persevered to rescue, protect and rehabilitate as many native animals as they possibly could because they understand the value of Australia's fauna.

During those frenetic weeks, it was abundantly clear that not only was there a huge expectation from local and international communities that Australia had to help the wildlife – this was an enormous animal welfare issue. There was also an eagerness to take action, whether that was by volunteering vet skills, helping rebuild shelters or sending supplies, people wanted to help. But what was lacking was a coordinated approach, one that aligned government authorities, professionals and local residents who all had the same goal – to help Australia's wildlife.

Our story

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Once the fires subsided, member groups in the north of NSW immediately mobilised to set up feeding and water station programs in fire-devastated areas and sought permission from

the National Parks and Wildlife Service to undertake search and rescue “black walks” to locate injured wildlife. However, no access was granted to the national parks or government-managed lands, such as state forests, and so these efforts were largely undertaken on private lands.

Communication between groups and members became difficult as volunteers lost power, internet services, and/or were forced to evacuate their homes and properties. At the same time, the NWC and member groups’ websites and social media platforms were inundated with thousands of enquiries from concerned members of the public and groups within Australia and around the world. Volunteer wildlife carers managing these platforms, while simultaneously attending full-time work and caring for injured fauna, reported they were overwhelmed and struggled to respond.

Over the 2019 Christmas and New Year period, the wildfires on the NSW south coast and Blue Mountains escalated. Whole communities and townships were evacuated and displaced, it was a life-threatening situation and left several of our members with serious injuries and property loss.

Fortuitously, during this time, NWC member group Sydney Wildlife received their newly constructed and fitted-out mobile wildlife clinic. It was immediately stocked with medical supplies and staffed with highly experienced wildlife rescue volunteers and wildlife vets who generously, without hesitation, volunteered their services. At the same time, we accepted offers of assistance from three international animal disaster emergency response groups from New Zealand (Helping You Help Animals New Zealand HUHA-NZ), Canada (Pattison’s Search and Rescue Canada) and Germany (Animal Emergency Disaster Response Germany), who had been corresponding with us since the fires began to hit the international media.

On 11 January 2020, Sydney Wildlife’s mobile clinic, with the assistance of the international groups, Aussie Mobile Vets and Vets Beyond Borders, established an emergency triage centre for wildlife on a carer’s property in Wandandian on the south coast of NSW, where they assisted NWC member and sister groups Wildlife Rescue South Coast (WRSC) and the Native Animal Rescue Group (NARG) with injured wildlife in the region.

It was immediately apparent that the assistance of qualified, licensed darters and shooters was necessary to capture injured animals needing treatment, and to end the suffering of animals that were beyond help. To this end, we contacted the NSW Firearms Safety and Training Council to request they contact their membership to find suitably licensed and qualified people that might consider volunteering for us. This organisation immediately responded and within a day we gathered a register of people to help. A press release to local media outlets alerted the local community to our presence and requests for assistance for injured wildlife began coming in from residents, wildlife carers, the Rural Fire Service, police officers, and National Park rangers. Local wildlife carers and many community members up and down the south coast, began establishing feeding and water station programs to support surviving wildlife on private properties and sanctuaries. Many international groups assisted in these efforts for weeks. These international groups donated large amounts of money for supplies, food, materials and flew in volunteers to help rebuild wildlife rehabilitation infrastructure on carers’ properties. In mid-January, Sydney Wildlife’s mobile clinic headed to the Blue Mountains and set up a second triage centre with the assistance of Vets with Compassion, Aussie Mobile Vets and wildlife veterinary surgeon, Dr. Howard Ralph and his team from Southern Cross Wildlife Care (a charitable organisation that

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Meanwhile, HUHA-NZ were directed from Wandandian to Cooma, immediately after the tragic crash of the US water bomber that was defending Two Thumbs Koala and Wildlife Sanctuary, to assist carers in Wildcare Queanbeyan and Looking After Our Kosciuszko Orphans (LAOKO Wildlife Rescue Monaro and Snowy Mountains).

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The NWC would like to make clear that this submission by no means includes all the organisations and individuals who provided assistance to our sector. We will forever be grateful to all that came to our aid and apologise for any omission – this is by no means deliberate.

Planning

Science and experience tell us that the frequency and intensity of major meteorological events are increasing – we must plan for major droughts, fires and floods. Given the expertise, extensive membership and international network of the NWC, it is evident that the volunteer wildlife rehabilitation sector has a considerable contribution to make towards emergency incident management planning and implementation.

To have the greatest chance of recovery if/when this reoccurs, it is essential that we align strategically to ensure we are better prepared, and we welcome this open inquiry and submission process. We are optimistic that the result will be a coordinated plan aligning government, non-government, and community organisations to prepare the best possible response to any future disasters. To do otherwise would be to risk further damage to Australia's wildlife and international reputation. It is our recommendation that experienced and skilled NSW wildlife rescue network takes a leadership role in the preparation and response to future disasters.

Further recommendations for discussion:

- i. Plan post-fire search and rescue operations in national parks, state forests and on private lands and to step up the RFS Bush Fire Awareness training to allow more wildlife carers and volunteers from the community to assist in this.
- ii. Pre-planned recovery programs should commence immediately to ensure remaining intact forest, regenerating forest and surviving wildlife is supported and protected. Conversely any potential further threats should be identified, mitigated, or halted to ensure no further losses are suffered and forest/wildlife regeneration and sustainability in national parks, state forests and private land is supported and maximised. For example, after fires of this scale, moratoriums should be placed on logging operations in remaining forests. Similarly, salvage-logging in burnt-out forests should also be prohibited until a full assessment has been undertaken as to the status of remaining flora, vegetation communities, threatened species, and fauna.
- iii. Moratoriums should be placed on the shooting or culling of native species e.g. Eastern Grey Kangaroos until thorough assessments have been made of remaining population numbers and dynamics.
- iv. Aerial 1080 baiting programs in national parks that have been significantly impacted by fire, for the purpose of eliminating feral exotic predators and native dingoes, should be put on-hold as it is impossible to ensure or monitor whether non-target species such as starving native wildlife, in desperation, may be consuming baits (and in what quantities) in the absence of natural foods in barren landscapes.
- v. Formal agreements with authorities for access to community facilities (halls, showgrounds etc) should they be required for wildlife treatment or shelter. We were refused access to empty community halls which meant it was often necessary to camp in burnt out properties or build temporary structures ourselves.
- vi. Formalised, planned and funded post-fire emergency feeding/water programs for wildlife on both private property AND in national parks.
- vii. Engage a veterinary volunteer coordinator who is highly experienced in mobilising field veterinary teams.
- viii. Decentralised supplies of veterinary equipment and wildlife supplies cached in strategic locations and mobile (eg vet supply trailers and storage facilities).
- ix. All terrain mobile veterinary hospitals and pop up triage centres that can be deployed as soon as it is safe to do so.
- x. Develop a system for collecting data that maps licenced wildlife rescuers, records response requirements to facilitate the

most efficient deployment of personnel or supplies, monitors efforts and ensures processes are followed.

xi. Private landowners, farmers, land managers, national parks officers and the general community should be encouraged to engage with their local wildlife rehabilitation network with a view to identifying and mapping bush recovery and fauna species sightings.

xii. Wildlife carer recovery programs should be developed and should include ongoing post -fire/disaster assistance to ensure wildlife carers' infrastructure is restored as quickly as possible so they can in turn provide emergency wildlife care in their area as quickly as possible. Wildlife rehabilitation infrastructures such as aviaries, cages, and fencing etc. are not covered by insurance as they are not deemed to be permanent structures leaving carers in the position of paying for them themselves or seeking donations.

xiii. Wildlife carers (and indeed entire communities) require assistance in dealing with the mental health issues that may result when coping with the grief and trauma of having one's life threatened, being evacuated, losing one's home and property and financial pressures. Many people, not just wildlife carers, are still living in properties/homes that are in ruins. Many are also grief-stricken at the amount and extent of forests and wildlife lost in these fires.

xiv. The provision for special leave for wildlife carers from their employment to assist with injured wildlife in times of disaster – similar to the leave that volunteer RFS fire fighters are currently afforded.

xv. A full and independent review of the NSW RFS 10/50 Clearing Code. The NWC agree with the concerns of the Nature Conservation Council regarding abuses of this Code and excessive clearing of tree canopy and bushland that in many instances appear to have little to do with bushfire risk or hazard reduction. Before clearing vegetation should be assessed by experts from or accredited by the RFS to determine the bush fire risk, rather than leaving the responsibility to landowners to self-assess. Allowing clearing without expert approval risks environmental considerations, threatened species and ecological communities being either disregarded or inadequately assessed.

The practice of removing all trees within 10 metres and all vegetation within 50 metres of a habitable dwelling (10/50) is inconsistent with many recommendations of the recently gazetted Planning for Bushfire Protection 2018 (PBF). PBP recommends clearing on the hazard side of a dwelling, 10/50 permits it on all four sides of a dwelling. Most property losses during the 2020 bushfire season were due to severe to catastrophic intensity of the fires which no amount of tree or vegetation clearing could ameliorate. Even already burnt grasslands were re-igniting. Spot fires occurred kilometres from the fire front, endangering built assets with little or no surrounding tree or shrub cover.

The NWC would like to see the RFS regain its former role in providing onsite advice and approval for hazard reduction activities. NSW RFS already has a streamlined environmental approval process in place that enables assessment of bush fire hazard reduction activities in The Bush Fire Environmental Assessment Code. This provides for hazard management appropriate to individual sites and identifies vegetation management that does not need to involve removal of all vegetation. Lessening engagement by the Rural Fire Service with at-risk communities has reduced the important role it plays in advising homeowners in other key bush fire management and maintenance measures. Homeowners need to notify the RFS

and relevant councils of vegetation clearance proposed so local fire managers have an up-to-date understanding of the clearance being undertaken.

Monitoring vegetation clearance carried out under the 10/50 Code is not possible without having a comprehensive reporting process in place. The 10/50 mapping tool is inaccurate with buffer zones not aligning with borders of vegetation hazards. Numerous properties are caught in the entitlement areas that should not be included. The entitlement areas apply even if only one or two square metres of a property are within a buffer zone. This allows unnecessary tree removal as well as significantly increasing building costs. There should be a mechanism whereby individuals can get incorrectly assessed properties removed from the entitlement areas, making alterations or new homes less costly.

A five-year Statutory Review has not yet taken place. A formal review was commenced following only two months of the scheme's operation, rather than two years operation as was the original intent of the legislation. It is therefore questionable whether any review has been done that assesses the full impact of the Code over time.

Finally, we recommend that inquiries such as this are circulated more widely amongst the wildlife rehabilitation sector. Many carers are still dealing with the physical, financial and emotional devastation in the aftermath of the fires. Many are still displaced, have lost their homes and/or wildlife rehabilitation infrastructure, and are continuing as best they can with feeding and water programs for the handfuls of wildlife that survived. The Covid-19 crisis is also heavily impeding recovery – rebuilding has been postponed, feeding and water station programs have become difficult to manage.

In summary, the absence of planning or assistance from the government for wildlife in this type of disaster is not only an animal welfare issue, but also an indictment of the government's attitude towards our native forests, fauna and indeed our volunteers. Australia has had a world leading extinction rate for decades, matched only in recent times by our deforestation and land clearing rates. It is apparent from the overwhelming response of our local and international community throughout this crisis that our forests and wildlife are indeed highly valued. In acknowledgement of this, the NWC requests that the wildlife rehabilitation sector is included in emergency response and incident management planning, and that they are provided with some of the necessary resources and support to protect these irreplaceable biological assets and to align with the wishes of the people.

Terms of Reference (optional)

The Inquiry welcomes submissions that address the particular matters identified in its [Terms of Reference](#).

Supporting documents or images

Attach files

- Submission to Bushfire Inquiry NWC MAY2020.pdf
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A five-year Statutory Review has not yet taken place. A formal review was commenced following only two months of the scheme's operation, rather than two years operation as was the original intent of the legislation. It is therefore questionable whether any review has been done that assesses the full impact of the Code over time.

Finally, we recommend that inquiries such as this are circulated more widely amongst the wildlife rehabilitation sector. Many carers are still dealing with the physical, financial and emotional devastation in the aftermath of the fires. Many are still displaced, have lost their homes and/or wildlife rehabilitation infrastructure, and are continuing as best they can with feeding and water programs for the handfuls of wildlife that survived. The Covid-19 crisis is also heavily impeding recovery – rebuilding has been postponed, feeding and water station programs have become difficult to manage.

In summary, the absence of planning or assistance from the government for wildlife in this type of disaster is not only an animal welfare issue, but also an indictment of the government's attitude towards our native forests, fauna and indeed our volunteers. Australia has had a world leading extinction rate for decades, matched only in recent times by our deforestation and land clearing rates. It is apparent from the overwhelming response of our local and international community throughout this crisis that our forests and wildlife are indeed highly valued. In acknowledgement of this, the NWC requests that the wildlife rehabilitation sector is included in emergency response and incident management planning, and that they are provided with some of the necessary resources and support to protect these irreplaceable biological assets and to align with the wishes of the people.