

# NSW BUSHFIRE INQUIRY

## *POST BUSHFIRES WILDLIFE RESCUE & RECOVERY*



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## **1. Introduction**

### 1A. Post-2019/20 bushfires

Over the past 5 months, I have worked in various capacities to forward post-bushfire wildlife rescue and recovery objectives and in doing so I have worked with several different licensed rescue groups.

As a member of Wildcare, NSW, I undertook requisite training to participate in Wildcare NSW's "black walk" search and rescue (SAR) program. In fact, I was on a koala SAR in Numeralla the day the American Coulson Aviation owned C-130 Hercules aerial waterbomber crashed, defending the Two Thumbs Koala and Wildlife Sanctuary.

Through Wildcare NSW, I volunteered to assist LAOKO in Cooma, the Snowy Monaro licensed rescue group, with their volunteer veterinary triage program and broader SAR objectives.

I worked with Native Animal Rescue Group (NARG), the local group in this region with feed and water stations and by taking volunteers on "black walks" within the Braidwood/Nerriga areas.

More recently, I helped establish the post-bushfire wildlife veterinary triage clinic in Tomboye and the SAR program executed in the Nerriga area.

WIRES, partnering with the Ripper thermal drone company, provided thermal drone technology assistance, which proved invaluable in conducting koala SAR. This technology enabled the identification of surviving koalas in the region, something we did not think possible given the extent of habitat destruction.



**Touga (known pre-fires koala colony) habitat**

## 1B. Post-bushfire wildlife recovery model methodology

An effective post-bushfire wildlife recovery response must be dynamic and requires the involvement of i) a fully equipped SAR team ii) clinical veterinary expertise and iii) adequate animal housing.

### 1B (i) Fully equipped SAR team

Wildlife SAR teams need to include veterinarians and veterinary nurses to facilitate *in situ* animal assessments. Also required are darters<sup>1</sup>, first aiders, snakers, spotters, euthanisers<sup>2</sup>, arborists and runners. And all SAR participants must have successfully completed relevant fireground training. SAR teams also need to be equipped with requisite PPE, first aid kits, radios and the relevant rescue equipment.

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<sup>1</sup> Darters carry dart guns that discharge tranquilliser

<sup>2</sup> Euthanisers carry firearms

### 1B (ii) Veterinary clinical space

Wildlife SAR must be supported by wildlife veterinary response capability in the form of a temporary clinical setting or space. An appropriate space for undertaking surgical procedures and immediate medical treatment of wildlife.



**Wildlife bushfire recovery clinics are temporary clinical spaces**

### 1B (iii) Wildlife housing

Wildlife SAR must be supported with appropriate and Code of Practice for Injured, Sick and Orphaned Protected Fauna (Code of Practice) compliant<sup>3</sup> enclosures for housing animals under veterinary care. This includes intensive care enclosures, intermediary care enclosures and pre-release enclosures.

Wildlife housing like the wildlife veterinary triage clinics are temporary, short term measures that enable veterinary care of rescued animals. Once animals satisfactorily recover, they are released from temporary veterinary clinics to rehabilitative care providers of licensed rescue groups.

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<sup>3</sup>Code of Practice for Injured, Sick and Orphaned Protected Fauna



Typically, wildlife housing is co-located with the wildlife veterinary triage clinic. In Cooma and Tomboye, the clinics and animal housing was set-up on private property. Prior to set-up landholders need to be aware of the scope of what is involved regarding wildlife recovery response and the nature of the impost involved. Clinics and animal housing can also be set-up on public property, ie showgrounds, council land, etc. Though the problem with public property and lands is restricting and managing public access.



**Wildlife veterinary pre-release enclosure**

The veterinary aspect of a dynamic wildlife SAR recovery response is enabled by organisations like *Vets Beyond Borders*, who supply these temporary veterinary clinics with volunteer veterinarians and veterinary nurses (from Australia and all over the world).

## **2. Lessons Learned**

### 2A. Working with National Parks and Wildlife

The *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974* (NPW Act) makes NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPW) responsible for the protection and care of fauna in NSW.

Despite this NPW mandate, NPW does not currently have wildlife veterinary capability. NPW does have access to veterinary assets but its focus is primarily on non-native invasive and feral species control. There is no capacity within NPW at this time for post-bushfire wildlife rescue and recovery.

Wildlife rescue and rehabilitation is substantively delegated to licensed wildlife rescue groups. However, there is currently little overall oversight, coordination or management, or at a governmental level, any existing framework for post-bushfire wildlife rescue and recovery. This represents a significant lack requiring urgent and immediate address.

2B. It needs noting that licensed volunteer rescue groups also lack this capability. Such groups are usually stretched to capacity caring for injured and orphaned wildlife and do not have access to volunteer veterinary services or the medical equipment required to run a fully equipped post-bushfire wildlife recovery SAR program.

2C. When organising wildlife SAR, we routinely meet with relevant stakeholders, including RFS, local council and local NPW offices to discuss accessing firegrounds and adjacent lands. SAR teams require entry to firegrounds and adjacent lands for the purpose of searching for injured and/or orphaned wildlife, enabling *in-situ* veterinary assessments and where necessary wildlife rescue.

As SAR teams include darters and euthanisers, and thereby carry firearms, there are firearms licensing issues for them entering NPW firegrounds and adjacent NPW lands. Ironically, these issues also apply to darters who are licensed under NPW to carryout euthanising activities for NPW. A mechanism needs implementing to address these discrepancies.

In order to fulfil its mandate to protect and care for NSW fauna, NPW needs to implement a number of mechanisms that will facilitate post-bushfire wildlife recovery processes, not prevent them.

This means addressing the introduction of non-NPW firearms, darters and launching thermal drones from within NPW lands for wildlife rescue and recovery purposes. Particularly as the overall purpose of wildlife SAR is the protection, rescue and recovery of NPW fauna.

### ***3. Ineffectiveness of a model dependant on volunteer licensed rescue groups***

#### 3A. Territorialism and organisational collaboration

The National Wildlife Council (NWC) is the peak body for wildlife rescue and rehabilitation in NSW and represents the 27 licensed wildlife rescue groups across the state.

These prescribed rescue groups are manned almost entirely by volunteers with no paid staff, and are funded solely by donations from the community.

They generally have no access to volunteer veterinary services and must pay for all veterinary services rescued wildlife receive. Indeed, it is required under the Code of Practice for Injured, Sick and Orphaned Protected Fauna (Code of Practice) that all rescued wildlife receive veterinary assessment within 24hrs of rescue. Individual licensed carers often front the burden of veterinary costs themselves.

Over the past five months, working with a number of different licensed rescue groups, I was impressed with licensed group's ability to work collaboratively with other groups. I found a collaborative effort absolutely essential to delivering an effective, consistent and coordinated post-bushfire wildlife recovery response. It became clear however, that this is not generally the norm.

Licensed jurisdictional rescue groups are inherently territorial by nature and establishment. I found that groups often regard each other with suspicion and when groups did work together effectively, it was often regarded as rather extraordinary. Groups and volunteers that can work well with others are a highly valued asset.

This is a link to the NWC webpage listing the various fragmented member groups and their prescribed regions of operation in NSW:  
<https://www.nwc.org.au/resources/injured-wildlife-find-your-nearest-rescue-group/>

### 3B. Rescue group capability

Many licensed rescue groups seriously struggled to meet the immense challenges of an effective wildlife bushfire recovery response. And many struggled to coordinate the lesser challenging, deployment of



supplementary wildlife feed and water stations, over the vast areas impacted by the fires.

Running an effective post-bushfires wildlife recovery program is a sizeable operation involving the coordination and maintenance of a rotating roster of veterinarians and vet nurses, darters, euthanisers, arborists, thermal drone operators, spotters, first aiders, snakers, builders and general volunteers and understandably presented significant challenges for even the larger, well resourced licensed groups.

### 3C. Lack of financial agility re: rescue group funding models

Many rescue groups are unaccustomed to receiving sizeable donations. Having received bushfire funding, some groups were reluctant to spend that money, even on post-bushfire rescue and recovery efforts, despite that being the very purpose for which both Australian and international donations were given.

Some groups relied on its members to pay up front for required resources, in the hope the group will approve said expense and then reimburse its member.

This is true of groups that operate under arguably archaic financial models, where expenses must receive committee approval. And even after approval, the group's Financial Delegate being the only member with authority to acquit those funds. This makes the model absolutely impractical (particularly where that Financial Delegate is inaccessible or remotely located).

When setting up a veterinary triage clinic, the following expenses apply: construction of appropriate sheltered animal housing (hospital enclosures/intermediary enclosures/pre-veterinary release enclosures/medical supplies/medical equipment/volunteer accommodation/SAR equipment/SAR training/PPE/skilled and technical expertise eg thermal drone operators/wildlife feed and water/petrol and incidentals.

Oft times expenses need acquitting expeditiously, requiring a greater level of financial agility than many licensed rescue groups possess.

### 3D. Autocracies

Some licensed rescue groups operate akin to small autocracies. For example a President or in some cases a member of the executive committee can make unilateral decisions, regardless of whether or not those decisions are consistent with animal welfare principles. In such cases there are often no mechanisms available for challenging questionable decisions.

Such rigid structures renders wildlife SAR recovery programs and their continuance, at the sole discretion of the rescue group President and/or member of the executive.

Additionally, some groups and group members do not comply with standard reporting requirements, nor do they possess any distinguishable processes for accountability, or any sense of transparency.

For example, few groups publicly disclose the amount of funding the group received or HOW those funds have or are being used.

Admirably, some groups tie bushfire donations to bushfire wildlife recovery actions<sup>4</sup>. At least in those rare cases, there is a level of assurance that the money donated is used for the purpose given.

### 3E. Oversight and issues of compliance

Parks and Wildlife Group (PWG) Regional Offices are responsible for overseeing the activities of licensed wildlife rescue and rehabilitation groups and license holders.

The Code of Practice prescribes minimum acceptable animal welfare standards that must be complied with, yet for the most part PWG leaves matters of compliance to the licensed rescue groups, themselves to manage.

Furthermore, and arguably unrealistically, PWG assumes licensed rescue groups will proactively volunteer instances of their own non-compliance.



**Rescued koalas from the Nerriga area**

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<sup>4</sup> As is the case with the licensed Wildlife Rescue Southcoast group.

#### **4. Summary**

Australia is home to the worlds most unique species, many of which do not occur in any other location outside of Australia. The 2019/20 bushfires season saw more than 12 million hectares of habitat destroyed.

In response Australia has experienced an outpouring of national and global support for native wildlife losses, which has overwhelmed rescue groups across the country.

The public post-bushfire wildlife support response is incredibly significant. Public support has been expressed in both financial donations and donations of thousands of home made macropod pouches, koala mittens, blankets and local and regional donations of food for supplementary feed stations.

There exists immense national and international support for Australian native wildlife protection, veterinary intervention and post-bushfires wildlife recovery assistance.

The NPW Act mandates the government with the protection and care of NSW fauna. As such, the government is perfectly positioned and resourced to lead, coordinate and facilitate an effective post-bushfire wildlife recovery response. And it is in the government's best interest to retain the reigns of post-bushfire native wildlife recovery.

The government can not only access the same volunteer assets and programs that were available to the 2019/20 volunteer post-bushfires wildlife recovery response, but I suggest are better positioned to more effectively coordinate and secure greater consistency in volunteer



**Douglas Paddock hosts a broad range of firegrounds**

veterinary efforts. This can be achieved by establishing a Wildlife Recovery Taskforce to map out a sound risk-based, intelligence led, bushfire recovery response model that can be deployed going forward.

‘Hand-balling’ this responsibility to the fragmented volunteer-manned licensed rescue groups, simply guarantees the delivery of inconsistent outcomes wholly dependant upon each individual rescue group’s financial capability and places an undue burden on these groups that they are not adequately equipped, resourced or skilled to manage.

The government has a duty of care to protect and safeguard Australia’s unique fauna and as such it must rise to the challenge, as thousands of volunteers in fire-affected areas of NSW have had to, without any financial support whatsoever, and with varying degrees of success.

## **5. Recommended action**

5A. NPW, NSW to establish a post-bushfires wildlife recovery response taskforce. The taskforce needs to articulate a deployable wildlife recovery model in consultation with 2019/20 bushfire recovery stakeholders and wildlife recovery participants (including vets, vet nurses, licensed rescue groups, Vets Beyond Borders, Vets For Compassion, darters, euthanisers and post-bushfires wildlife recovery volunteers).

5B. NPW, NSW to research the viability of either upskilling and funding licensed rescue groups to enhance their post-bushfires wildlife recovery capability or developing greater departmental post-bushfires wildlife recovery capability.

5C. NPW, NSW to create a deployable team of resources and assets as a post-bushfire wildlife recovery response.

5D. Given the need for veterinary intervention, NPW, NSW to work closely with volunteer veterinary organisations to expand NPW post-bushfires wildlife recovery capability.

5E. NPW, NSW to research the viability of deploying mobile veterinary units, particularly addressing issues relating to rescued animals' veterinary treatment duration and requisite animal housing.

5F. NPW, NSW to review post-bushfires wildlife recovery NPW access issues noted in this submission. NPW to also review firearms licensing issues and address discrepancies regarding state licensed darters and euthanisers and legislate reasonable exceptions for post-bushfire recovery SAR purposes.