
**THE ROYAL SOCIETY FOR THE PREVENTION OF CRUELTY TO ANIMALS NEW SOUTH WALES
SUBMISSION TO THE 2022 NEW SOUTH WALES GOVERNMENT INDEPENDENT FLOOD INQUIRY**

The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals New South Wales (RSPCA NSW) is a not-for-profit organisation that cares for, treats, and protects almost 50,000 animals across the state every year. As a charity with the goal of improving animal welfare and keeping people and animals together, RSPCA NSW acknowledges the crucial role that people play in keeping animals safe. Along with cats and dogs, RSPCA NSW cares for and protects a wide range of other animals including horses, rabbits, guinea pigs, birds, goats, cattle, and sheep.

Our Core Functions

RSPCA NSW has two core functions which are derived from separate legislation.

Under the statutory duty provided by the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979 (POCTAA), RSPCA NSW delivers the largest animal enforcement unit in Australia, with a team of inspectors dedicated to investigating instances of alleged animal cruelty across NSW, and a call centre equipped to handle over 15,000 cruelty complaints per year.

As a Rehoming Organisation recognised by the Companion Animals Act 1998 (CAA), we operate six shelters, three veterinary hospitals, one rehabilitation and behaviour centre, and one care centre, dedicated to treating, rehabilitating, and rehoming animals.

Our Community Programs

Sadly, several factors can result in even the most devoted pet owner having to relinquish a beloved pet to a local rescue group or shelter. We operate multiple community programs that provide critical support to people and their pets when they are experiencing hardship and crisis. This includes domestic violence, isolation, homelessness and displacement, mental health, and financial constraints.

We believe that financial circumstances alone are not a reliable indicator of a person's capacity to love and care for a companion animal, and strong bonds between people and their pets make for stronger communities. Keeping pets and people together is often the best outcome for the pets, their owners, and the community – and this is what RSPCA NSW strives to achieve with our Community Programs.

Since 2006 we have partnered with NSW Health to deliver the Indigenous Community Companion Animal Health Program and improve the health and safety of Aboriginal children and families in remote communities by improving the health and welfare of their companion animals. The program provides veterinary services in communities where might otherwise not be able to access them like Bourke, Brewarrina, Collarenebri, Enngonia, Goodooga, Taree, Walgett, Weilmoringle and Wilcannia, and education relating to animal and human health and wellbeing and good pet ownership.

Our Education Programs

Education campaigns that increase community awareness about the importance of desexing and other aspects of socially responsible ownership are a vital part of the programs. Our community and engagement team invest in the future through education programs, school visits and resources for teachers so we can teach the generations to come kindness and compassion towards all animals, and how to responsibly care for them.

As a Registered Training Organisation (RTO) we are developing the skills of future generations of Animal Attendants, Vets and Vet Nurses, passing on the skills and knowledge our organisation has developed for over 150 years.

RSPCA NSW in partnership with the NSW Government

As demonstrated by our core functions, community and education programs, , we frequently work alongside the Department for Primary Industries (DPI), the Office of Local Government (OLG), NSW Health, NSW Department of Education, NSW Office of Environment and Heritage (OEH), NSW Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) Local Land Services (LLS) and others to deliver NSW Government priorities and have a proven track record of measured and impactful success.

Natural Disaster Response

Helping creatures great and small is the foundation on which our organisation has been built and when disasters strike, we will keep our promise to be an effective form of relief and comfort to these vulnerable communities in need.

Whether it be drought, fire, flood, plague or pandemic, the last two years have been relentless for the communities of NSW, and RSPCA NSW has been helping right across the state as we face each challenge together.

Black Summer Bushfires

The 2019-20 Australian bushfires were unprecedented in their expanse and ferocity. During the crisis, RSPCA NSW was on the ground, both during the emergency and in its wake, to provide support and care to our state's most vulnerable animals and their communities.

Along with the devastation of our wildlife and their habitats, RSPCA NSW provided critical support for the owners of pets who had lost their homes during the fires and had to rebuild their life whilst trying to care for their animals. We were able to assist people and their pets, easing the physical and financial burden they may have been experiencing by providing supplies, surgeries, treatments, medication, advice, and shelter. We independently attended over 129 bushfire affected communities throughout the state, providing much-needed supplies and assistance.

RSPCA NSW responded immediately and effectively in this crisis – \$1.3 million was spent on the ground, rescuing, and treating injured animals in their hour of need, as well as supporting animal owners in crisis by providing food, bedding, emergency surgery, temporary fencing and animal housing, medicine and flea and tick treatment.

When the fires were tearing through the state, leaving nothing but smoulder and devastation, we dispatched teams of animal experts to emergency evacuation centres as they were established and we were notified. In the days and weeks following the fires, thirty-two independent RSPCA NSW pop-up relief to directly support impacted communities with much-needed supplies.

RSPCA NSW was not allowed to enter active fire areas until they were cleared for public access. This led to thousands of animals that might have been able to be saved or supported, not receiving assistance. Images of members of the public entering fires to save animals are revered for good reason but given the danger, it prompts consideration as to why a structured organisation, with enforcement responsibilities and trained staff would not be a better solution to meet the communities needs and achieve a better outcome.

Pet Owner Planning

Emergency planning for pets is an important part of emergency household preparations. Planning is critical and increases the likelihood of evacuating pets to safety. Unfortunately, in emergency situations, pet owners often have no choice but to leave their pets behind because they have not considered them in their evacuation plans. It is important to take the time to prepare early to ensure the safety of pets.

Since 2015, we have offered free Disaster Management Plans and Pet First Aid Kits to educate households about keeping your pet safe in an emergency. Over 118,000 households have requested these and pleasingly there has been a big shift in households, with most people putting a plan in place well ahead of an emergency. Thanks to RSPCA NSW's foresight and commitment to our role in emergency response, people are now more likely to take their pet with them than we saw historically.

RSPCA NSW's 2022 Flood Response

RSPCA NSW has taken an active role in assisting the communities who have been impacted by the 2022 floods. Since the beginning of the floods, our Inspectors were in constant contact with DPI and stood at the ready in the event we are formally triggered by emergency management.

In NSW, DPI are the primary agency for animal welfare during any emergency, however they often delegate responsibilities to RSPCA NSW due to our experience and animal handling equipment. During an emergency, DPI appoint someone who communicates updates to relevant organisations like RSPCA NSW so that we then have staff at evacuation centres or Inspectors and Vets in rescue areas.

A flood is vastly different from a fire. Most animals manage to get themselves to higher ground so long as they are not fenced in a small area or tethered. While the floods are occurring, emergency responders focus on human life and rescues and once flood waters begin to recede, we are called upon for further assistance with recovery.

On March 1, DPI requested that four members of our staff man the evacuation centres in Tweed Heads to help with caring for animals, providing food, water, and cages if and/or where required. A second evacuation centre was set up in Castle Hill Showground where we also provided assistance.

As the floods began to affect the southern part of our state, we mobilised to also deploy teams to both Sussex Inlet and Bomaderry evacuation centres to support both people and animals in need. In Lismore, our inspectors have been on the ground working with locals, DPI and LLS to assess, identify and deliver much-needed food and assistance to livestock in need.

Our staff and some volunteers were deployed to the Grafton Region and our teams worked with LLS to get much needed pet supplies to communities that had been impacted. Pop-up relief points were established, by us, in multiple flood affected communities, to provide pet supplies and triage any enquiries or requests for further support needed in the community including veterinary treatment or larger requests for supplies.

The following table provides an overview of the pop-up relief point locations and activities:

LOCATION	TYPE	STAFF/VOLUNTEER	ACTIVITIES
Central Coast Shelter	Pop-up relief point	Staff/volunteers	Distributing supplies
Illawarra Shelter	Pop-up relief point	Staff/volunteers	Distributing supplies
Lismore	Assisting at local clinic – Lismore Vets	Staff	Animal care & feeding Cleaning Laundry Equipment sterilising Building repairs
Camden	Evacuation Centre	Staff	Distributing supplies
Sussex Inlet	Evacuation Centre	Staff	Vet care and medical checks Caring for animals Distributing supplies
Bombaderry	Evacuation Centre	Staff	Caring for animals Distributing supplies
Castle Hill	Evacuation Centre	Staff	Stock assessments Set up temporary fencing Caring for animals Distributing supplies
Grafton	Relief point	Staff/volunteers	Distributing supplies Vet care and medical checks Assisting DPI
Camden	Relief Point	Staff	Distributing supplies
Lake Conjola	Relief Point	Staff/volunteers	Distributing supplies
Wiseman's Ferry	Relief Point	Staff/volunteers	Distributing supplies
Sanctuary Point	Relief Point	Staff/volunteers	Distributing supplies
South Windsor	Relief Point	Staff	Distributing supplies
Ulladulla	Relief Point	Staff/volunteers	Distributing supplies
Richmond	Relief Point	Staff	Distributing supplies
Riverstone	Relief Point	Staff	Distributing supplies
Glossodia/Bligh Park	Relief Point	Staff/volunteers	Vet checks Fodder distribution Distributing supplies

It is important to note that this is in addition to the hundreds of cruelty complaints and inspections conducted by our inspectorate team to farmers and animal owners in need across the state, outside of emergency response.

The harsh reality for RSPCA NSW, is that whilst we are mobilised and helping to support animals and communities in need during a natural disaster, we are still also responding to regular cruelty complaints and operating all of our shelters and clinics.

Future Disaster Responses

While we are proud of our work in the 2020 Black Summer Bushfires and the 2022 floods, we know that there is much more that could be done to help people and help their animals. It is clear from the requests for assistance that we receive during times of disaster, that the community expects RSPCA NSW to be on the frontline of emergency response, alongside SES, Rural Fire Service, Red Cross and other relief organisations.

However, to meet the community's expectations and assist those in need, improvements to the State Emergency and Rescue Management Act 1989 (SERM) need to be made to account for and represent animals within emergency response and preparedness. Currently animals are not featured throughout the Act, and this is a huge gap that needs to be addressed to modernise the act and improve the role RSPCA NSW and other animal welfare agencies can play in emergency response.

Additionally, and more immediately, the process of our formal activation and placement during a disaster is necessary to better our response time and in turn, support more animals impacted by these emergencies. This will allow us to help more directly *during* the disaster rather than shortly after and provide support during the recovery.

Response times can only be improved if we have a team with the training that allows them to respond immediately, rather than after the emergency has been dealt with. Now, response times are slow because of three key factors:

- The activation of our teams is managed through a department which is separate from the overall State Emergency Management team, and this causes delays in communication.
- Our staff are held back from responding to protect their safety as they are not trained to enter a flood or fire zone until they are cleared by the department in charge.
- When we are called to assist in evacuation centres or other locations, it is often discovered by staff on arrival that they are either no longer needed, or the location has closed

For communities that have fled their homes, taking care of their pets or livestock can be the last thing on their mind but quickly one of the foremost challenges. Our help is needed directly during the disaster and is currently delayed for the reasons outlined above regarding response times, but also due to communication and information barriers.

The support RSPCA NSW currently provides during recovery is often the thing we do best because we do not have the same limitations placed on us and are able to autonomously operate, however this can also be improved by being given a greater understanding of where there is a need for help. These services include free veterinary treatment, inspectors putting fences for famers and other animal owners, providing pet and livestock food, and providing pet care products.

To overcome these challenges, a structured response unit is required, like the NSW SES and NSW RFS. This would ensure that a professional response is delivered by people who are trained and ready to coordinate with other rescue units.

A New Core Function

In addition to the two core functions RSPCA NSW delivers, as provided for under POCTAA and CAA, we propose that a third core function be established for the organisation as an accredited rescue unit under the SERM. This newly formed non-government accredited rescue unit would be known as the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals New South Wales Disaster Response Unit (RSPCA NSW DRU) and use the inspectors who are already equipped to handle animals, firearms, and operate under legislation as crime enforcement officers.

Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals New South Wales Disaster Response Unit

Structured similarly to existing accredited rescue units, RSPCA NSW DRU will be run by highly trained staff operating RSPCA NSW rescue vehicles that are clearly marked as such and fitted with warning devices, such as flashing lights or a siren, and satellite radio communication and GPS technology.

As a member of the State Emergency Management Committee, RSPCA NSW DRU would be able to contribute to the State Emergency Management Plan and ensure that the rescuing of animals become part of the state's disaster response operations.

RSPCA NSW DRU Mission

To provide a world standard of excellence in the provision of an animal rescue and emergency service and prevent cruelty to animals in emergencies and disasters by providing the highest standards of training, community education, prevention, and operational capability.

RSPCA NSW DRU Locations

RSPCA NSW already operate animal shelter and veterinary facilities across the state:

1. **Greater Sydney**
RSPCA NSW Sydney Shelter and Veterinary Hospital, 201 Rookwood Road Yagoona.
2. **Blue Mountains**
RSPCA NSW Blue Mountains Shelter, 121-125 Mort Street Katoomba.
3. **Central Coast**
RSPCA NSW Central Coast Rehabilitation Centre, 455 Reeves Street Somersby.
4. **Illawarra**
RSPCA NSW Illawarra Shelter, 54 Industrial Road Unanderra.
5. **Hunter**
RSPCA NSW Hunter Shelter and Veterinary Hospital, 6-10 Burlington Place Rutherford.
6. **North Coast**
RSPCA NSW Coffs Harbour Shelter, 25 Dowsett Drive Coffs Harbour.
7. **Central West**
RSPCA NSW Central West Shelter, 71 William Street Orange.
8. **Far West**
RSPCA NSW Broken Hill Veterinary Hospital, South Road Broken Hill.

In addition to these physical locations, investment in additional response vehicles and emergency field response tents will allow our inspectors to respond to a disaster in any corner of the state.

RSPCA NSW DRU Training

RSPCA NSW Inspectors who are RSPCA NSW DRU Brigade Members would be required to undertake training which provides the necessary skills and knowledge to operate while a natural disaster is taking place and assist alongside other rescue units. It is proposed that formal fire, flood, and related training be provided by the relevant agency or accredited training provider to ensure consistency of agency response and safety protocols.

RSPCA NSW DRU Structure and Coordination

In FY23, RSPCA NSW is recruiting a Senior Manager of Disaster Response and Recovery, who will be able to coordinate activities between the NSW Government, RSPCA NSW, and RSPCA NSW DRU throughout the creation of this new accredited rescue unit.

The Senior Manager of Disaster Response and Recovery would also be able to operate from SEOC Homebush during a disaster to ensure communication is seamless, passing information onto the regional teams of inspectors, minimising RSPCA NSW DRU response times, and coordinating with NSW Government agencies to ensure our skills sets are effectively and efficiently deployed in a timely manner and where the greatest immediate needs exist.

Short-term or one-off immediate grant funding to support responding agencies and rescue units to deliver the objectives of the relevant operation ought to be available, with grants for the provision of food, medical supplies and/or short-term shelter or agistment for animals in need. Associated legislative reform may be required so that responder organisations and their staff are not subject to liability arising from 'good Samaritan' activities that result in unforeseen or unintended consequences.

Summary

This ambitious endeavour will future proof disaster response for animals and animal owners and allow for RSPCA NSW and the NSW Government to meet community expectations during emergencies and find an appropriate joint funding model.

RSPCA NSW looks forward to working with Resilience NSW to create RSPCA NSW DRU based on the latest science, technology, and expert advice.