

28 May 2020

Senate Select Committee on COVID-19
Committee Secretary
Department of the Senate
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CANBERRA
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Dear Committee Members

Submission to the inquiry into the Government's response to COVID-19

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Select Committee inquiry into the Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Few Governments have borne the responsibility of responding to a global pandemic like COVID-19. The challenges faced are unprecedented. While, on the whole, the Australian Government should be commended for its response, there are many learnings to take away from the experience to improve future responses.

Australia has one of the highest rates of animal ownership in the world. It is vitally important that animal care and welfare issues are factored into emergency management planning at all levels of government, including at the federal level. There was limited national coordination of the many and varied animal welfare issues raised by COVID-19. Stakeholders and the public were left in a state of uncertainty about key issues including whether they would be permitted to travel to care for animals during lock down measures. These assurances were not provided by the Australian Government and information from state and territory governments was varied and inconsistent.

State and territory RSPCAs played a key role in providing essential animal care and welfare information and services to the community; however, more was needed from government to improve the response effort. We provide several key recommendations for how we believe the Government's response can be improved.

We trust our submission will be of assistance and look forward to providing any further information the Committee may require.

Yours sincerely,

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1. Key recommendations

1.	Veterinary services, authorised officers and animal care and welfare agencies should be classified as essential services, and movement to provide essential care to animals should be recognised as essential travel during movement restrictions.
2.	Governments of all levels must recognise the need to address animal welfare in crisis response planning and strategies. Significant animal welfare risks must be identified early, and resources allocated to managing them.
3.	Emergency Animal Welfare Committees should be established in each state and territory (where not in place already), with the Chair of each Committee participating in a National Emergency Animal Welfare Committee facilitated by the Australian Government. Emergency Animal Welfare Committees should liaise with key representative groups to ensure clear and consistent information is provided to stakeholders, animal industry workers and the general public.
4.	Clear and consistent messaging on animal care and welfare issues, including essential service status, should be provided to stakeholders and the public at all times during emergencies. Clear advice about caring for pets and livestock should be delivered via one centrally located digital space. All other departments and agencies should refer the public to this central “source of truth”.
5.	Government funding should be made available for animal care and welfare agencies and Local Government Authorities to continue to help animals in need during a crisis.

2. Government response to animal welfare issues during COVID-19

Lack of national coordination on animal welfare issues

The Australian Government established several intergovernmental and industry committees to provide expert advice, liaison and coordination during COVID-19, including the Agriculture Industry Engagement Team on COVID-19. However, there was no equivalent committee established to advise and coordinate animal welfare matters. We recommend that the Australian Government establish a National Emergency Animal Welfare Committee. This Committee would collate and disseminate information from state and territory jurisdictions, industry, and animal health and welfare organisations, and coordinate nationally consistent responses to animal welfare issues as they arise.

Inconsistencies and delays in state and territory government communication

During a crisis it is important that the public receives clear messages about the situation and what actions they should take. Lack of clear direction and conflicting or confusing messaging makes a stressful situation more difficult and does not support people in making the changes they are being asked to action in order to address the crisis.

During the COVID-19 response, there were significant delays in directions being given to the public on important animal welfare related matters, such as whether people could leave their homes to care for animals. There were also inconsistencies in the information provided by the states and territories. State and territory RSPCAs received many questions from the public on a variety of topics. Consequently, the RSPCA found it necessary to prepare public information articles to help people navigate the COVID-19 situation and restrictions while still caring for animals. This included whether people could leave their home to care for animals; this information was difficult to find and there were many inconsistencies between jurisdictions, even in April (some weeks into the crisis).

RSPCA experienced significant impacts to its operations, fundraising, education and HR areas (see section 5 below). Although some of these impacts could not be avoided, having clear and timely communications would have been helpful, particularly, having greater clarity on what was being restricted and what would continue to be essential services.

Lack of centralised information

No centralised information was made available to the public regarding animals and COVID-19, including how to care for animals, what to consider in different circumstances, and the risks of transmission of the virus to and from domestic animals. It fell to organisations such as the RSPCA and the Australian Veterinary Association to make this information available to the public.

Even though this information is now available, it is still not centrally located on state and territory governments' COVID-19 information pages. Instead, the information available is often on various related websites (e.g. Primary Industries websites) but there are usually no obvious links to these resources from state and territory governments' COVID-19 information pages and the information is not easy to locate.

We recommend state, territory and federal governments include a dedicated section on animals highlighting everything the public needs to know about animals and COVID-19 on their general COVID-19 information pages.

Essential services

There was also confusion about whether animal care sectors would be included as essential services. Veterinarians and animal welfare organisations were in urgent need of clarity from the Government about their ability to operate under potential restrictions and lockdowns. As late as 27 March 2020 Australian Greens Senator and Animal Welfare spokesperson Dr Mehreen Faruqi considered it necessary to [call on the Government](#) to commit to recognising veterinary and animal care, rescue and protection services as essential services during the COVID-19 response, as this was still uncertain.

Agriculture Minister David Littleproud later clarified that the Australian Government considered veterinary services to be essential services, but other animal care sectors were not specifically given essential services status (including shelters and welfare organisations such as the RSPCA). This continued to add to the uncertainty and confusion generated by the COVID-19 crisis.

3. Recognising animal care and welfare services as essential

It is critical that essential animal care and rescue services provided by the RSPCA and other animal welfare organisations be recognised by state and territory governments as essential services, and for travel to care for animals in captive environments (zoos and aquaria, stables, kennels, research facilities etc) to be considered essential movement, for the following reasons:

- Animals in captive environments will starve and perish if carers, including RSPCA personnel, are prevented from attending;
- Wild animals in distress (for example, trapped in situations they cannot escape from, sick, injured or orphaned) will suffer and die if wildlife rescues and care cannot continue;
- Cases of animal cruelty and neglect are not expected to subside during pandemics. In fact, under increasingly difficult economic circumstances they may escalate. Therefore, Inspectors are required to respond to prevent further suffering and death;
- Human safety will be put at risk, as extensive past experience shows that community members will take matters into their own hands when cruelty, neglect, or rescue cases arise and RSPCA or Government personnel are prevented from attending;
- Extensive experience of emergency and disaster management in Australia and internationally shows that when pets and other animals are not factored into emergency response strategies it can lead to significant unintended consequences, primarily due to individuals deliberately disobeying safety directives that inhibit their ability to care for their animals;
- General levels of community anxiety and panic will elevate should animal care, welfare and veterinary services be unavailable to the community in times of need; and
- To allow RSPCA and other organisations to continue providing essential bushfire recovery services to avoid compounding hardships already experienced by bushfire affected communities.

The essential status of such services and movement must be formally recognised in relevant state and territory public health directives.

4. Effective response case study - New Zealand

To deal with the COVID-19 crisis, New Zealand quickly set up an Animal Welfare Governance Group consisting of industry and government members to lead the response. The aim of the group is to provide collective leadership and advice around animal welfare risks during the COVID-19 crisis. This allowed significant animal welfare risks and issues to be identified early, plans and strategies to be put in place to manage them and for plans to be effectively communicated. Several working groups were also established to feed into the Governance Group:

AW Governance COVID19 work streams and working Groups

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transport • Feed Supplies - Feed Service 0800 • Feed Supplies - Feed Importers • Moving Day • Bobby Calves • Livestock Supply Chain Management • <i>Mycoplasma bovis</i> infection response • Pigs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On farm destruction - solutions for farmers unable to get killing space for their animals • Wildlife • Poultry • Companion Animals • Horses • Lab Animals
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In addition to the Animal Welfare Governance Group, New Zealand has a standing Animal Welfare Emergency Management Group (see the [Welfare Services in an Emergency Director's Guideline \[DGL 11/15\]](#)). At the national level, the Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI) is the agency responsible for:

- Coordinating the provision of animal welfare services for all animals, including companion animals, production animals, animals in research, testing and teaching facilities, zoo and circus animals, and wildlife;
- Coordinating the planning for animal welfare in emergencies; and
- Maintaining the Government's reporting and advisory capability on animal welfare in an emergency.

The Animal Welfare Emergency Management group (AWEM) aims to provide national oversight, and a collective effort by government and industry on key animal welfare issues. In the current crisis, the group was directed to consider the most pragmatic ways to solve the current and upcoming animal welfare issues caused by the COVID environment.

During COVID-19, there were weekly AWEM meetings and summaries from these are distributed to key stakeholders. AWEM developed a COVID issues register to address the animal welfare related issues.

In addition, there have been other frequent meetings with animal welfare stakeholders such as the New Zealand Veterinary Association (NZVA), SPCA NZ, and MPI to ensure key stakeholders are aligned and supported.

Clear advice was made easily and centrally available to the public about caring for pets and livestock during the COVID-19 pandemic (see [COVID-19 and animal welfare](#)).

MPI delivered frequent public messaging on their website throughout the COVID-19 crisis. They also sought feedback from stakeholders on this information and stakeholders, such as SPCA NZ, assisted with this information where possible.

In NZ, only essential services could operate at Level 4 (NZ's lock down). There was an approval process to go through to gain essential services status. This included outlining the procedures to be used to minimise risk of COVID-19 transmission at each alert level. SPCA NZ was included as an essential service through this registration process.

In NZ, [Local Authorities were also able to recover the welfare costs](#) they incurred when supporting people displaced or required to self-isolate due to the COVID-19 pandemic, including pet food for companion animals.

Overall, NZ's approach included recognition of the need to address animal welfare as part of the crisis, a clear structure and plan to do this, effective and clear messaging for stakeholders and public, regular meetings that listened to and supported stakeholders, and a very collaborative approach. We recommend the Australian Government review the New Zealand Government's management of animal welfare issues during COVID-19 with a view to adopting an equivalent approach in Australia.

5. Role of the RSPCA during COVID-19

Shelters/clinics

State and territory RSPCAs continued to operate their shelters and clinics around the country including taking animals into care, caring for the animals already in their care, conducting adoptions, coordinating foster carers and providing veterinary services while navigating COVID-19 restrictions.

The RSPCA provided care for animals when owners were admitted to hospital or isolation and also provided support to members of the public impacted by COVID-19 such as providing bags of necessities to allow them to continue to care for their animals.

Inspectorates

RSPCA Inspectors have continued providing their animal protection services around the country with enhanced biosecurity protocols and use of personal protective equipment. Several state and territory Inspectorates have noted a slight decrease in the overall number of cruelty reports received during COVID-19 restrictions. However, of those reports received, there appears to be a higher prevalence of intentional cruelty cases, such as beatings.

Other observations in some states include a reduced capacity for police to assist with safety checks and property visits, which has a work health and safety impact on RSPCA Inspectors. There are also increased timelines for matters going before the courts, which can mean that animals seized by Inspectors have to remain in the RSPCA's care for longer periods of time before they can be adopted. Not only does this have serious animal welfare implications, but RSPCA will also incur the additional costs associated with feeding, housing and medical care. This will also impact on the shelters' capacity to take in new animals and will require additional animal attendants and potentially more vets and vet nurses.

Wildlife rescue and care

Throughout the movement restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, RSPCA ambulances continued to operate and, in QLD, 60% of the animals collected by RSPCA QLD were wildlife. RSPCA ambulances directly rescued wildlife trapped in situations which they were unable to escape, were sick, injured or orphaned. RSPCA also collected wildlife from people's houses and from vet clinics. Educational resources such as a YouTube training video was created for the public to demonstrate how people could have wildlife collected from their home while maintaining social distancing and staying safe. In fact, the number of wildlife rescues increased during the movement restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition to RSPCA's wildlife care and rescue work, there are other groups in all states that solely rescue and rehabilitate wildlife and their services are vital to protect the welfare of wildlife. They are also on the road to rescue wildlife which could be left to die a slow agonising death if there was no one to do this (e.g. a flying fox caught in barbed wire).

Provision of information

RSPCA has also played a role in providing services and information to help support the government's response to COVID-19.

There was a need for publicly available information to help the public navigate the COVID-19 situation and restrictions while still caring for animals. The RSPCA wrote the following detailed articles on topics relating to animal care, animal welfare and COVID-19 and made them available to the public on its [Knowledgebase website](#). These articles received more than 42,000 visitors over the past 2 months:

- What information do we have about the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 and domestic animals?
- Do domestic animals spread novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19)?
- Can people infect pets with the novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2)?
- What are animal welfare and public health concerns associated with 'wet markets'?
- How can I prepare my pets for easing of COVID-19 restrictions?
- How can I ensure my horse's welfare during COVID-19 restrictions?
- Can I leave my home to care for animals during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- How can I socialise my puppy during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- How can I ensure my farm animal's welfare during COVID-19 restrictions?
- How should I look after my backyard hens during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What should I do to keep myself, my pets, and others safe while practising social distancing?
- How can I prepare for COVID-19 self-isolation so that my pets and I stay safe?
- What do I need to do if I or a close contact contracts COVID-19 to keep us and our pets safe?
- What do I need to prepare for my pets in case I require hospitalisation due to COVID-19?

Representatives from state and territory RSPCAs also contributed to relevant committees under their state's emergency management framework in those jurisdictions where these exist, and as part of this, outlined key risks and mitigations relating to animal welfare and personnel from COVID 19. Through these Committees, actions to mitigate risks to animal welfare could be identified and assigned to the relevant agency to progress. These were useful avenues to address animal welfare concerns where they existed and could be further utilised for a greater communications function.

The RSPCA, in conjunction with the Australian Veterinary Association, also liaised with the Veterinary Boards in each state and territory to clarify information being provided to vets by the Boards about what constitutes essential veterinary procedures. This highlighted the need for key animal related agencies to come together early on to ensure consistent messaging is provided to animal industries, vets, and the general public.

Impacts on RSPCA

Like many charities, the RSPCA is bracing for an increase in demand for its services as people face economic hardship and are forced to make the heartbreaking decision to relinquish their pets to our centres. Unfortunately, in times of economic hardship we also see a sharp rise in animal welfare complaints owing to higher rates of animal abandonment and neglect.

The animal welfare sector is highly reliant on fundraising to finance their operations. A high proportion of income is derived from fundraising activities and public events, both of which are negatively affected by crises such as the pandemic, which induce economic hardship and the cancellation of large gatherings. The twin challenges of both negative impacted fundraising and increased demand for services during times of economic hardship make the animal welfare sector particularly vulnerable.

The reduced JobKeeper eligibility threshold of 15% has been gratefully received by the animal welfare sector. Without this support The RSPCA federation would be facing the prospect of standing down a significant number of its workforce. However, when the ATO defines 'fall in turnover' for charities, it would be beneficial for income from gifts in wills to be excluded from this calculation. This is because gifts in wills are not a reliable and predictable income stream, and previous receipt of a gifts in wills is not a reliable indicator of future receipt of gifts in wills.

All RSPCA entities across Australia have felt the impact of COVID-19; these impacts include:

- Needing to close RSPCA Op Shops as a large proportion of the volunteer workforce that run them are over the age of 70 years.
- Having to cancel Million Paws Walk, a significant fundraising event which equates to \$267K in fundraising income.
- Donations are forecast to drop by 30% due to an increase in Australians suffering financial hardship as a result of COVID19 - i.e. decrease in work, revenue from business etc.
- Decrease in veterinary clinic customer numbers to improve safety, but this has also resulted in decline in revenue figures.
- Office based employees and volunteers have been required to work from home where possible.
- Changes to operating protocols have been made at all sites, including closing access to sites to the public, introducing services by appointments, increased cleaning regimes and ensuring social distancing practices by employees, volunteers and visitors.

- Reduction in travel by employees and volunteers between sites.
- Increased absenteeism by staff and volunteers due to them experiencing flu like symptoms and self-isolating.
- Employees and volunteers over the age of 70 years or over the age of 60 years with a chronic illness are required to stay home.
- Cessation of all non-essential temporary, casual and contractor arrangements.
- Stand down of employees who perform roles that have been directly impacted by decisions regarding our operations, and no longer have useful work to perform based on their normal duties.
- Cancelled education programs such as school holiday programs and short courses due to safety concerns and Stay at Home directives. Our world-leading school program is unlikely to be in operation/demand until 2021.
- RSPCA Victoria's landmark prevention pilot - Latrobe Loves Pets - was regrettably closed only 5 weeks into the project due to health and safety concerns.