

20 February 2023

Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Committee Members

Inquiry into Australia's Disaster Resilience

The RSPCA appreciates the opportunity to make a submission to the inquiry into Australia's disaster resilience.

The RSPCA is Australia's most trusted animal welfare charity. We have worked alongside policy makers and the community for more than 150 years to improve animal welfare in Australia. Operating under a federated structure, the RSPCA comprises of RSPCA Australia and eight state and territory RSPCA member Societies. RSPCA member Societies care for and protect animals across the country through animal shelters, and in most jurisdictions, inspectorate services and in many instances, provides emergency response during disasters.

Animals are an important part of our society, having their own intrinsic value, as sentient beings capable of experiencing positive and negative states of wellbeing. Beyond their own considerations, animals are also an important part of the lives of many humans; over 69% of Australian households own a pet[1], livestock contribute over \$1.6B to our economy [2], and Australia's wildlife are an important part of our national identity and a key connection to nature for Australia's First Nations people. It is crucial that animals are considered when preparing for, responding to, and recovering from natural disasters.

Historically, the importance of including animals in Australia's disaster preparedness and response planning was recognised through the establishment of the National Advisory Committee for Animals in Emergencies and the subsequent publication of the National Planning Principles for Animals in Disaster [3]. A key finding of this work was 'failure to account for animals puts human life at risk.' Given the increased frequency of natural disasters and the lessons learnt in the past 5-10 years from Australia's experience, reviewing and updating these principles may be a good starting point to address the animal components of disaster resilience in Australia.

General recommendation: That there is a review of the National Planning Principles for Animals in Disaster.

We have responded to two key portions of the inquiry - specifically the role of not-for-profit organisations and their ongoing capacity and capability to provide support in times of disaster, and the practical, legislative, and administrative arrangements that would be required to support improving Australia's resilience and response to natural disasters.

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Please do not hesitate to contact us if you require any further information or clarification on the matters addressed.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Suzanne Fowler". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Dr Suzanne Fowler
Chief Science Officer
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RSPCA SUBMISSION

Inquiry into Australia's Disaster Resilience

Inquiry reference:

(a) current preparedness, response and recovery workforce models, including

iv) The role of Australian civil and volunteer groups, not-for-profit organisations and state-based services in preparing for, responding to and recovering from natural disasters, and the impact of more frequent and more intense natural disasters on their ongoing capacity and capability

Many state and territory RSPCA bodies provide staff, most commonly inspectors and veterinarians, to assist with emergency management response. This has been evident in NSW during the 2019/2020 bushfires and in NSW, VIC and SA during the 2022 floods.

Support provided by the RSPCA during disasters has included:

- Assisting Local Land Services District Veterinarians - animal assessment, recovery and or euthanasia of livestock and were further able to assist with provision and distribution of emergency fodder as required.
- Provision of veterinary support for various species (depending on the individual state/territory framework) e.g. wildlife, livestock etc.

As a not-for profit organisation that relies heavily on donations from the public, the RSPCA has a finite capacity to provide support. In particular, due to business-as-usual requirements, there is a limited amount of hands on, veterinary/inspector support that can be provided without compromising shelter operations and the day to day care of animals in RSPCA shelters/foster situations. As natural disasters become more frequent and intense, for the RSPCA to continue to provide the same or an increased level of support, provision of adequate resources as well as proactive planning and engagement with the appropriate response teams in each state and territory would assist in preparing for and meeting the delicate balance between business as usual and emergency support as needed.

Recommendation: Where ongoing and increased support is expected to be needed from not-for-profit organisations, further financial resources are needed to allow for this flexible capacity and needs to be met in the long term.

With an audience of over 1.5 million on popular social media sites and extensive distribution across Australia, the RSPCA also has an important role in information sharing, education, and outreach. The RSPCA should be identified as a key portal for information sharing in any planned communication strategies, both for disaster preparedness activities/campaigns and during disasters and the recovery period.

Recommendation: Consultation with not-for-profit organisations that can provide communication pathways to assist with distribution of information would enhance individual and community preparation for disasters.

Inquiry reference:

(c) Practical, legislative, and administrative arrangements that would be required to support improving Australia's resilience and response to natural disasters

There are a number of components that would improve Australia's resilience and response to natural disasters and improve outcomes for humans and their animals.

There is significant evidence that accounting for and recognising the importance of the human-animal bond can improve not only animal outcomes but also human health and mental wellbeing during and after disasters [4]. It is crucial that any review to improve Australia's resilience and response to natural disasters includes a component to address animal welfare outcomes including companion animals, animals used for agriculture, and wildlife.

From a practical component, there are several suggestions, based on state and territory RSPCA experience, that could improve disaster response.

Communication and decision making

RSPCA staff report that a successful and efficient model is the inclusion of animal care and management in the central response centre. Such centres should include veterinary and animal welfare expertise to provide advice, on the ground assessment, and instruct individuals where to find items of need for animals (e.g. food, leads, bowls etc).

Where the RSPCA has access to a contact person within the decision-making framework, with a clear communication and escalation chain, this allows for the rapid and effective ability to identify and escalate matters of high importance (e.g. identifying individuals that can't or won't evacuate due to obligations to animals, getting access to remote areas where animals are at risk etc).

A group/individual should be assigned centralised responsibility for animal welfare management to ensure that animal management is not only part of the disaster management framework, but they are integrated into the response and decision-making process. The response of individuals and small animal rescue/welfare groups, if uncoordinated, can lead to confusion and poor efficiency/transparency of which geographical areas are covered and those that might remain at risk. An animal response coordinator, should be assigned responsibility to provide clear, concise, and accurate information and also manage mapping response activities, coordinate access to areas cleared for attendance by trained individuals, maintain a list of responders and those in need of assistance for various species, the coordination of donations (in kind/supplies), and arrange other activities as appropriate.

Having clarity and transparency on the location and roles of animal response teams is crucial to ensure efficiency but also has a degree of human safety concern as there is often a need to deploy individuals with firearms to assist with euthanasia and this must be managed with caution.

By having a role for animal welfare management within the decision-making team of the disaster management framework, this can facilitate a more integrated approach that can reduce silos and enhance consistency and collaboration across various parties managing disaster response activities. Recognising the importance of such collaboration can assist with making

efficient decision making and maximising the benefits of the human animal bond in responding to disaster situations [4].

Recommendation: There should be a response model that includes:

- a. **Animal management team as part of the central response centre.**
- b. **A hierarchy of communication and response management specific to animals. This should include identifying a key individual within the decision-making framework with overall oversight of animal-related responses who has the responsibility to manage animal response activity, direct and authorise access to certain geographical areas, transfer key communication points to the relevant decision making bodies, and provide an efficient flow of information to responding animal welfare organisations and rescue groups.**

Information sharing

The RSPCA is Australia's most trusted animal welfare organisation and is often turned to by the public who are concerned about individual animals and where animals are found stranded or at risk. For the public, being able to access clear, concise, and accurate information about response plans is crucial. Ensuring such communication pathways are available can improve community confidence and reduce humans putting themselves at risk if they could be sure matters were being dealt with through an appropriate response.

We note that Australia already has in existence the Australia Disaster Resilience Knowledge Hub. This is a key source of information managed by the National Emergency Management Authority and Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience. We would suggest that having more practical guidance on disaster preparedness for livestock as information for farmers and other producers would be beneficial for improved animal welfare outcomes as well as Australia's economy.

Recommendation: Existing communication networks, such as those already held by the RSPCA, to be mobilised to provide clear, concise information pathways to a single point of information for the public in times of emergency response and during recovery periods.

Recommendation: Expand the Australia Disaster Resilience Knowledge Hub to provide more practical information for farmers on disaster preparedness for livestock.

Data

There is a lack of consistent and reliable data available on the holding of animals in particular geographical areas across Australia. Having access to such data is important to plan and manage any disaster response activity. Key opportunities to improve such data acquisition would include appropriate investment in data collection through the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) for agriculture purposes, appropriate identification management for traceability for cattle and sheep, and an individual horse traceability system. We note that recently, the ABS announced its intention to stop collecting and reporting on agricultural commodity data. We see this as a significant risk to many areas of agriculture management, including facilitating thorough and effective disaster response activities.

Recommendation: Further investment in acquiring, managing, and maintaining data on the location and holding of animals across Australia is needed to allow for effective and efficient management during times of emergency.

Training/preparedness

State and territory RSPCA staff and volunteers have varied levels of expertise and training in disaster response. We would propose improving consistency in the availability and delivery of training to understand local response frameworks and ensure confidence in staff/volunteers to respond in times of disaster. This should include the running of practical disaster management scenario testing to facilitate rapid action and improve confidence in individuals' capabilities during times of emergency. It would also be valuable to have a core group of individuals who have undertaken fire group safety and other training opportunities that will ensure human safety but also allow for those with animal handling skills to enter disaster areas as soon as safe and practical during/after an emergency.

By ensuring appropriate planning and training, it would allow not-for-profit organisations such as the RSPCA to identify key individuals that may need to be mobilised during a time of emergency and assist with their business continuity planning to support business as usual activity at the shelter/operational level in addition to emergency response assistance.

Provision of training that allows for interprofessional collaboration and allows for refinement of response activity ensures greater acknowledgement of the various roles and challenges at the time of a disaster and increased awareness of the need for collaboration at times of high demand on individuals.[4]

Recommendation: Further investment in training initiatives that include individuals with animal handling, husbandry, and management skills to allow them to respond rapidly and enter disaster areas as appropriate. Such training should include interprofessional collaboration activities.

Support for regional attendance

The geographical size and terrain challenges can make it difficult to establish rapid networks across emergency areas. In addition, many RSPCA bodies have limited resources available to station inspectors/skilled staff in regional areas as a regular fixture. Having locally trained and knowledgeable staff, skilled in the management and husbandry of the types of animals in the area, would assist with more efficient response times and more decisive action. This should be supported with ongoing training opportunities for emergency response, human safety, animal and self-rescue.

The availability to mobilise a response team rapidly to attend to animal health and welfare varies between states and territories. In many regions, it would be beneficial to have access to an emergency response vehicle that is well equipped and can be mobilised rapidly through the emergency response framework. This would provide a visual cue to those in the area of their availability and allow for a dynamic response as needed.

Recommendation: Further investment in the development of animal-specific emergency response vehicles appropriately equipped to respond to regional disasters.

Human safety

The identification of concerns for human safety, in particular at the organisation level, can sometimes restrict the ability to provide rapid and adequate human resource support in times of emergency. Some clarity on the obligations of organisations to their staff and volunteers in such periods would be valuable to help senior managers/executives to determine what support is appropriate to provide. Providing training and information to not-for-profit groups in advance, can assist in their emergency planning programs to identify how to mobilise individuals that are willing and able to assist without concern about their obligations to the Work Health and Safety Act 2011 [5] and other legislative frameworks.

As identified earlier in this submission, adequate opportunities to provide training and mock response scenarios would likely assist with the responsibility of managers to ensure staff are adequately prepared and can maintain their own safety as a priority.

Recommendation: Clear guidelines for not-for-profit organisations that provide support during times of disaster as to their obligations and responsibilities for staff and volunteer work health and safety conditions.

Post disaster

In the aftermath of a disaster, there is often a lack of clarity as to where ongoing support is best directed. Maintaining a map and register of ongoing support needs, and ongoing coordination between welfare and rescue groups would ensure efficient use of resources/donations so that supplies are directed to where they are most needed, best used and delivered in an efficient and effective manner.

In terms of response for wildlife care and management, there is currently research being undertaken to assess the effectiveness of wildlife feeding programs to support wildlife left in disaster-affected areas. Such research activities need to be continually supported to allow for long-term assessment of success and improve programs in the future. This is crucial to ensure survival of wildlife, effective use of human and feed resources post disaster, and will be crucial to helping Australia's native environment rebound after times of natural disaster.

Recommendation: A coordinated and government-managed post-disaster management team responsible for the ongoing delivery of support for animal welfare purposes.

Recommendation: Further investment in research initiatives to determine the most effective mechanisms to deliver support to animals in disaster-affected environments.

Access

One of the most common challenges experienced by state and territory RSPCA groups is the ability to rapidly access affected areas to respond to concerns for animal welfare. Whilst the RSPCA recognises the importance of maintaining human safety, there should be an established and pre-agreed structure to allowing access for responding to animal welfare concerns.

Recommendation: Access to disaster grounds, for those with appropriate skills and training to manage animal health and husbandry, must be a key consideration in disaster planning and management strategies.

Local arrangements

Due to the varied size and resource capability of state and territory RSPCAs, the involvement of their staff and volunteers in disaster response varies significantly. We believe that in this instance, local state and territory frameworks need to be tailored to the capabilities of the local NGOs etc. As long as there is an agreed structure, agreements made during ‘peace time’ on what resources are available, how they would be accessed/deployed and the communication pathways, then this should allow for appropriate management within the variations seen between each state/territory.

Recommendation: Local response planning activities must incorporate the knowledge and expertise of those involved at the local level, including RSPCA staff.

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3. National Planning Principles for Animals in Disasters. In: [https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/resources/ajem-apr-2015-national-planning-principles-for-animals-in-disasters/.](https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/resources/ajem-apr-2015-national-planning-principles-for-animals-in-disasters/)
4. Squance H, Macdonald C, Stewart C, Prasanna R, Johnston DM (2021) Strategies for implementing a one welfare framework into emergency management. Animals. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani11113141>
5. Work Health and Safety Act 2011. In: <https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C2018C00293/Download.>

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