



Response to Department of Home Affairs - Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response Discussion Paper - WIRE

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[REDACTED]

A/Director

Crisis Capability and Readiness Section

National Resilience Taskforce, National Security Division

National Security and Resilience Group

Department of Home Affairs

Phone: [REDACTED]

email: NationalResilience.Consultation@homeaffairs.gov.au.

[REDACTED]

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Introduction

NSW Wildlife Information and Rescue Service Inc (WIRES) welcomes the opportunity to respond to this review – Alternative Commonwealth capabilities for crises response. Our opportunity to respond to the review was provided as a result of representation made to Minister Watts in 2023 about the omission of the wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector from disaster resilience and response planning and processes that the federal government has been leading (refer MC23-030174).

In responding to WIRES we are heartened that the Minister acknowledged the vital role that volunteers, veterinarians and wildlife hospitals play in caring for sick and injured wildlife, particularly during and following natural disasters. There was also acknowledgement that the inaugural Higher Risk Weather Season National Preparedness Summit had a limited focus and did not encompass the important work that is done in disasters by wildlife rescue and rehabilitation organisations, like WIRES.

In making these representations our aim is to ensure that government-led disaster response initiatives across Australia recognise the importance of incorporating wildlife emergency response into their policy, planning and program design.

We are not seeking special treatment, just to be treated equally.

About WIRES

WIRES is Australia's largest wildlife rescue organisation and operates a dedicated Wildlife Rescue Office assisting wildlife and the community across Australia 24-hours a day, 365 days a year, providing rescue advice and assistance for over 130,000 animals annually. We have around 4,000 dedicated volunteers operating in NSW. We support more than 4,000 volunteers nationally.

In addition, we have a fleet of Wildlife Ambulances operated by full-time, professional Emergency Responders across NSW, South-East Queensland and Tasmania. These ambulances travel, on average, 40,000 kms per year and have responded to more than 12,900 rescues since October 2020. We maintain capacity for emergency response with specialised emergency response teams who are specifically trained and equipped to respond to disasters. Our fleet of vehicles includes 4wd vehicles capable of deployment to firegrounds. We use sophisticated technology (X matters, Everbridge) to maintain situational awareness, alert people to be on standby and to deploy our people to emergencies rapidly.

WIRES trains hundreds of rescuers and carers annually across Australia. We are dedicated to the ongoing recruitment of new volunteers and the continued training of existing volunteers. This growing network is critical for the rescue and rehabilitation of our unique native wildlife.

WIRES has responded to more wildlife rescues since its inception than any other group in Australia. We provide a public good which is ordinarily the responsibility of State and Territory Governments to a significant level of avoided cost. For example, in NSW the

volunteer contribution in this sector is estimated to save the government, at a minimum, approximately \$27 million per annum and this is growing.⁽ⁱ⁾

WIRES has developed partnerships and programs and provides forward-thinking national support to hundreds of projects which aim to see protected and listed species' populations increase through protection efforts. Since the 2019-2020 summer bushfires, we have had an increasing focus on supporting projects that protect and restore threatened habitats and provide for the long-term recovery of wildlife habitat and the preservation of native species in the wild.

WIRES is prepared to be a co-contributor to government supported initiatives to improve wildlife emergency response in every State and territory, subject to the right opportunity and arrangements.

Summary of WIRES recommendations

WIRES recommends the Federal government:

- Implement the recommendations of the 'Wildlife Care in Australia' report in consultation with relevant jurisdictions and stakeholders, with the intent to establish an agreed set of national principles across all States and Territories to optimise wildlife emergency response in future disasters
- Adopting a national network capability approach for wildlife emergency preparedness and response across the nation and support this with an appropriate funding framework and through partnerships with wildlife groups and corporate entities
- include wildlife rescue and rehabilitation representatives into Federal disaster and community resilience plans and programs to ensure wildlife rescue and rehabilitation is represented at a national level during disaster planning, response and recovery
- Formal inclusion and representation in state/territory disaster and emergency planning groups and committees or creation of a dedicated wildlife sector Disaster Management group to feed into established emergency planning committees, to allow for coordination and participation of the wildlife rescue sector, including veterinarians, engaged in frontline responses
- Funding to support wildlife rescue groups and veterinary practice to prepare, respond and recover from emergencies and disasters and remain financially viable in disaster prone areas to sustain their services through the recovery and longer term
- Recognition of veterinarians as essential service providers for wildlife during disasters for the purpose of accessing emergency provisions and consumable resources from the national stockpile
- Creation of a funding framework, special tax concessions or incentives for wildlife rescue groups and veterinarians to meet the cost of rescue, treatment and rehabilitation during and following disasters
- Recognition of the role the wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sectors play in disaster response and recovery, and support for veterinary practices in the pre disaster and recovery period.
- Include wildlife in National Crisis Exercise Programs

Context

Australia is one of only 17 'megadiverse' nations and is home to more species than any other developed country, with about 87 per cent of our mammal species, 93 per cent of reptiles, 94 per cent of frogs and 45 per cent of our bird species being found only in Australiaⁱⁱ.

Despite having the worst animal extinction rate in the world, we are still a lucky country when it comes to our native animals. They are iconic, unique, still abundant enough for us to marvel at their beauty, sound, form, and function when we encounter them on bushwalks or long drives in the country.

Wildlife is also important for the economy. For example, nature based tourism in NSW estimated to be worth about \$20B to the NSW GDP annually by Destination NSWⁱⁱⁱ.

Australian communities, in all locations and from all backgrounds, have an indelible and inextricable connection with native wildlife. Wildlife is part of our social character, our rich cultural heritage and important to our identities as Australians.

People in focus

Collectively, the volunteer wildlife rescue sector and veterinarians make up a large army of volunteers across the nation to aid wildlife affected by disasters, with estimates of between 18,000 to 20,000 people doing this important work nationally.

The work WIRES and the many other organisation like us do is akin to every other first responder in disasters. Like firefighters, paramedics and police, but for protecting wildlife and the communities in which they reside. The vast majority are volunteers. It's hard and confronting work. Wildlife rescuers and veterinarians, like other first responders, also experience post-traumatic stress disorder.

The people involved in this sector come from the very communities that are affected by disasters. This is a key factor that we feel needs to be understood by those involved in disaster resilience and response. The work we do is important for people as well as wildlife. And not just the people who are first responders, or back office volunteers, but people in the community who are devastated when their environment is so deeply affected by disasters that it manifestly changes their interaction with, enjoyment and celebration of living in Australia.

Acknowledging these people, and the work they do to protect wildlife, and integrating it into disaster response and supporting it wherever possible with equivalent opportunity to access funding, will help ensure resilience for every community where wildlife is seen as an important part of their lives as Australians.

Lessons learnt but now forgotten?

During Black Summer fires, the [World Wildlife Fund](#) estimated over 3 billion animals were impacted in Australia. Millions of people around the world and across the nation mourned for our wildlife. The focal point for many people in Australia and across the world was the terrible toll taken on Australia's precious and unique wildlife.

Three years ago, the Royal Commission into Natural Disaster Arrangements and the NSW Bushfire Inquiry recognised the need to do better and integrate wildlife rescue groups into incident response arrangements^{iv} A multitude of other reviews confirmed that a different approach was required to protect wildlife in future disasters^{v vi}

National principles for wildlife emergency response

The Federal government commissioned a multi state review through a Heads of Environmental Ministers Meeting that led to the 'Wildlife Care in Australia Report'. The draft of this report which we last saw in April 2021 contains sound recommendations that reflect the lessons learnt from the many reviews previously mentioned. This sector would support the promulgation and implementation of this review which would enable a standardised and consistent approach across all jurisdictions. However, we are advised by the Federal Minister for the Environment that the report has been finalised but not publicly released. There appears to be no interest from the Federal government in progressing the report's recommendations further. We recommend that, in the context of the positive and proactive role the Federal government can play in helping state and territories be disaster-ready in future, the Minister for Environment facilitate discussions amongst the Environmental Ministers Meeting about accepting and implementing the subject report's recommendations.

We are aware that in a disaster priority must be given to protecting human life and property. We do not question this for those organisations that do such a fantastic job protecting our communities. What we are seeking is inclusion into disaster preparedness programs and incident response planning to support emergency response with well trained and prepared people who can attend to the needs of wildlife. We do not seek to impose the work on others, but to step forward to meet the need. We are ready to do so.

No matter how well-prepared WIRES and groups like ours are, if we are not incorporated into the incident response frameworks and disaster preparedness and community resilience programs, we will never get an optimal response for wildlife in a disaster.

National network capability

A network approach across the nation is recommended to ensure no jurisdiction is left behind in terms of capability and it easier for the wildlife sector to act as a surge workforce in various jurisdictions. It is not envisaged that the ADF would play any role in wildlife emergency response except in exceptional circumstances.

Network capability could include:

- **Ambulance network** - for deployment to any disaster location
- **National call centre** – to receive calls and deploy responders
- **Training** – to ensure consistency and compliance with standards
- **Specialist personnel** - with clear roles to be integrate into incident teams (eg, vets, rescuer, darter/shooter)
- **Wildlife Hospitals** – to receive animals needing veterinary treatment
- **Triage tents and supporting equipment** – to provide in-field assessment and first line emergency response

- **National operating protocols** – to ensure consistency and ease of operation of surge workforce
- **Post fire recovery support** – to ensure consistent support and the provision of food and water for badly affected wildlife (if needed)
- **Community education and awareness** – to provide information and advice to affected communities about measures taken to protect wildlife and help them recover

To achieve this the Federal government would need to provide national principles and funding incentives for the State and territories and partners involved. It is not envisaged that the funding burden would fall to the Federal Government alone. With the right support and design, WIRES believes it is possible to do this through a public private partnership arrangement where organisations like WIRES, corporate entities, and State and Federal governments work together to achieve agreed outcomes in priority locations.

For example, WIRES already has relationships with corporate partners who support our emergency response capability such as Everbridge, well recognised in the emergency response industry as a leading provider of solutions (eg [Everbridge Marks Three Years of Supporting Australia's Largest Wildlife Rescue Organisation - Everbridge](#)). With the appropriate framework and supporting incentives from the Federal government WIRES is confident it can grow these relationships and attract more funding to support the expansion of wildlife emergency response capability further across the nation.

A better way of funding

The volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector, with the support of veterinary practices, provides a critical service to all governments in wildlife emergency response and public good for the people those governments serve. Presently, as a predominantly unfunded community service, these services are reliant on donations and represent an avoided cost to the government.

The current avoided cost approach is not sustainable, does not reflect public expectations, and outcomes will worsen if the government fails to develop a framework and provide appropriate support for veterinary practices and the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector. In NSW, the Henry-led *Independent Review of the Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016* is clear on the unsustainability of the current approach, and limited government support.

The network approach would provide a national essential service and a social and public good that would be highly valued in communities across the country. However, a funding commitment and ongoing government support are essential for success. Continuing with business as usual will lead to poor welfare outcomes for our precious wildlife, ongoing risks to the sector, and significantly increase the risk exposure of governments across the nation of a repeat of the Black Summer debacle – being a critical failure in wildlife emergency preparedness and response.

There is a clear need for a funding framework that includes appropriate incentives for the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector, veterinary practices, and specialist wildlife hospitals to continue to provide wildlife triage and treatment in emergencies, and to have the necessary facilities to provide safe and effective medical care.

With increasing public awareness of the biodiversity and extinction crisis, and the impacts of a changing climate on habitat and species, broader public demands for government action will grow louder.

Sustainable funding for a national wildlife emergency response network

Such a government framework must be sustainable, designed around incentives to establish national network capability in accordance with agreed national standards across jurisdictions over the long term. The Federal government's role in this could be to ensure access to funding opportunities for wildlife rescue groups that demonstrate a commitment to advancing network capability in accordance with agreed standards and protocols, looking for partners that can maximise the benefit of fund allocations. There have been a few examples of government providing funding to wildlife facilities post disaster but none of these have been aimed at improving national capability at scale. The Federal government could also examine taxation incentives or concessions that could be applied and consider tied funding arrangements with the States and territories to ensure appropriate commitment and focus in developing the network capability across the nation.

Conclusion

WIRES' response has identified many areas in which action is needed by the Federal government to ensure the inclusion of the wildlife sector and veterinarians into disaster preparedness, response and resilience programs. Chief amongst these is the promulgation of national principles for effective wildlife emergency response and the creation of network capability across the nation to enable the rapid and effective deployment of wildlife rescue and veterinarian personnel and equipment as needed. Given WIRES, experience, expertise, capacity and strategic intention, we would welcome an opportunity to be included in future discussion and planning about helping to achieve better solutions for wildlife in future disasters.

Developing a national, networked approach is essential to ensure positive outcomes for wildlife and a broader public good, more-so given the increasing impacts of the biodiversity and extinction crisis.

Yours sincerely,



Leanne Taylor CEO

[Redacted contact information]

Response to discussion paper questions

● What changes in the current system are necessary to help Australia have the right capabilities and capacity to handle concurrent crises?

- Adoption of national principles,
- Incorporation of wildlife emergency response into AIMMS.
- Effective collaborations across state and territory boundaries to facilitate the easy movement of wildlife emergency responders in these jurisdictions
- Support for the development of a national network approach for wildlife emergency response.

● What models could the Commonwealth explore to replace or supplement support currently provided by the ADF during domestic crisis?

– What does the right mix of Commonwealth capabilities look like?

- Commonwealth provides national principles and co-funding for national wildlife network.
- States lead integration of wildlife emergency response with appropriate roles and functions, standardised training, equipment and process, consistent with national principles
- Wildlife emergency response groups and veterinarians provide on the ground support for rescue, triage, rehabilitation or euthanasia.
- A national network of emergency responders and assets be implemented supported by a national call centre for wildlife emergency response
- Appropriate compensation for wildlife emergency first responders for protracted disaster deployment to ensure they are not worse off financially for front line response to disaster.

– How could a Commonwealth workforce surge capacity be replicated in a scalable, efficient and effective way?

- By engaging organisations like WIRES that have significant experience, assets, resources and capability in wildlife emergency response and which are prepared to activate and escalate in disasters if effectively incorporated into disaster resilience and preparedness programs and supported through appropriate funding, financial support or cost concessions.

– How could we harness the critical role of volunteers and civilian groups under this model?

- Empower this sector with recognition, inclusion, access to funding to enable it to effectively participate and co-fund initiatives that would improve wildlife emergency response across the country.
- WIRES is establishing a National Wildlife Network and invites the Federal Government to play a lead supporting role. The Network will work across jurisdictions with core funding provided by WIRES. The intention of the network is to support all groups that request it with training, access to grants, resources, food and improved capability for wildlife emergency response. The network is the potential platform for establishing a nationally consistent approach to wildlife

emergency response, enabling us to establish an effective network of trained personnel, veterinarians, ambulances and supporting assets such as triage tents and trailers, deployable in surge capacity and able to be coordinated by relevant incident managers in their respective jurisdictions.

– How do these models supplement, but not replicate, existing models operating at a state and territory and local level?

- Some states and territories have existing models that are specifically designed to ensure optimal response to wildlife in disasters, The Victorian government has provided approx. \$17 m to Zoos Victoria to prepare for, respond to and coordinate future response to wildlife affected by disasters. The South Australian government funds SAVEM to play a similar role in wildlife emergencies.
- No other State and territory has effective arrangements in place leaving large gaps across the nation in response capability. In addition, while both Victoria and SA were affected significantly by Black summer bushfires, even with these arrangements in place, supporting resource deployment from other jurisdictions is complicated by a lack of nationally agreed protocols and standards. In NSW this severely impacted the ability of external volunteers to contribute effectively to protect wildlife during the Black Summer bush fires as many inquiries have revealed.

The proposed model of developing a national network will enable:

- Deployment of surge force capability where needed across the nation
- Better support to plug gaps in jurisdictions that have existing arrangements
- Building of resilience and optimised support for wildlife in disaster affected communities

For the Federal Government, we see the role as being in three specific areas:

- Establishing National Principles for wildlife emergency response and promulgating them across the nation
- Providing access for wildlife emergency response and rescue groups to Disaster Relief funding with the specific objective of building a national network of people and assets, consistent with the national principles mentioned above.
- Supporting and promoting current initiatives WIRES has in train to further the establishment of a national wildlife emergency response network and a national call centre.

– What role could industry / the private sector play? How can the Government attract increased investment in emergency management from the private sector?

- WIRES has established relationships with many significant corporate partners who would be well placed to support wildlife emergency response if there was sufficient recognition, inclusion and support from the Federal government. We are confident corporate partners would augment resources if the opportunity were provided by your government.

– What gaps currently exist in state and territory emergency management capability?

- There is a failure to incorporate wildlife emergency response into business as usual incident response. This delays rapid response, frustrates willing volunteers including veterinarians, exposes wildlife and communities to increased peril, impacts people who want to stay behind to safeguard animals in care.
 - There is also a failure to understand that wildlife may need supplementation post the most intense period of a disaster, with food and water provisioning being a difficult task that is not well coordinated or understood.
- **Are there sectors that could replicate the capabilities provided by the ADF?**
- If incorporated into disaster planning, response and support mechanisms, we are not likely to need to impose resource request during crises so long as we are supported by the appropriate inclusion in emergency response plans and national principles.
 - WIRES sees opportunities to work with Indigenous Rangers to increase capability of those communities to respond to wildlife disasters and providing opportunities to build capability and support those communities in many other ways. The Federal government's Indigenous Ranger program is a useful vehicle to develop a partnership to explore this opportunity.
- **What are the critical functions the Commonwealth Government should continue to perform in disaster relief and recovery, in support of local, state and territory governments?**
- Support the adoption and activation of national wildlife emergency response principles and roles during disasters.
 - Ensure wildlife consideration are incorporated in national emergency coordination and that each state and territory has arrangements in place to support surge work force allocation to deal with wildlife emergencies.
 - Ensure that National Emergency Management stockpile provides access to consumables for veterinary services provided to wildlife and that veterinarians are listed as essential personnel.
 - Include wildlife in National crisis Exercise Programs
 - Enable wildlife rescue groups to participate in disaster relief funding
- **What legislative, regulatory or policy changes could be undertaken to make it financially viable for other sectors to contribute to a Commonwealth crisis response capability?**
- The Federal government should promulgate National principles for wildlife emergency response and the recommendation of the 'Wildlife Care in Australia' Report
 - This would provide the appropriate platform for ensuring standardisation and consistency across Australia for deployment of response resources to protect wildlife in disasters. It would enable organisations like WIRES and supporting veterinary services to effectively act as a surge workforce, deployable across the country.
 - It would enable standardised training and preparedness and an ability to swiftly and efficiently deploy across jurisdictions.

- This would need to be supported by funding support where appropriate at the federal level. This includes a recognition of the vital role wildlife rescue groups play in this space and in doing so ensure funding through disaster relief funding programs are available.
- The wildlife sector should be included in disaster planning and response representative groups at the National and State levels.

Endnotes

ⁱ [Wildlife Rehabilitation Sector Strategy | NSW Environment and Heritage](#)

ⁱⁱ [Australia is a megadiverse country - what does megadiverse actually mean? - Australian Conservation Foundation \(acf.org.au\)](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ [Economic Contribution of Tourism to each region in NSW | Destination NSW](#)

^{iv} [National Natural Disaster Arrangements | Royal Commissions](#)

^v [Rescuing wildlife from bushfires—critical report details lessons from Black Summer - Humane Society International \(HSI\)](#)

^{vi} [Emergency Response to Australia's Black Summer 2019–2020: The Role of a Zoo-Based Conservation Organisation in Wildlife Triage, Rescue, and Resilience for the Future - PMC \(nih.gov\)](#)