

The Australian Veterinary Association Limited

ABN 63 008 522 852



Unit 40, 6 Herbert Street St Leonards NSW 2065
Telephone: (02) 9431 5000 Facsimile: (02) 9437 9068
Email: members@ava.com.au Website: www.ava.com.au

30 July 2009

The Secretary
Senate Select Committee on Agricultural and Related Industries
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600
agriculture.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Ms Radcliffe

Inquiry into bushfires in Australia

The AVA is the professional organisation representing veterinarians across Australia. The vision of the AVA is to have a global community that respects and values the benefits of enhanced animal health, welfare and production. To achieve this vision the AVA sets standards of professional excellence, promotes the advancement of veterinary science, facilitates continuing education and provides leadership and expert scientific advice relating to a range of areas.

The AVA nationally represents approximately 4,900 members around Australia of which 80% are in private practice. This figure includes as a majority veterinary surgeons who are employers as well as employee veterinary surgeon members. Further approximately 15% of the total membership are veterinary students.

The AVA offers our attached submission to the Inquiry.

Our submission is based in part on experience at the bushfires in Victoria in February 2009. AVA was concerned to ensure that there was coordination of the veterinary response for animals affected by the fires, particularly the hundreds of pets, horses and wildlife, and established the Veterinary Emergency Taskforce (AVA VET) to assist in the coordination of the veterinary response. The taskforce activities are outlined in this submission.

The AVA wishes the Select Committee every success and is ready to assist with in person evidence or further submission if required.

Yours sincerely

Dr Mark Lawrie
President

Encl

AUSTRALIAN VETERINARY ASSOCIATION

SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE INQUIRY INTO BUSHFIRES IN AUSTRALIA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) is the national representative body for the veterinary profession in Australia and has over 5000 member veterinarians.

The unprecedented bushfire event on Saturday 7 February 2009 clearly highlighted the inadequacies of planning and preparation arrangements for managing the animals affected by this disaster. This event serves as an example for the management of bushfires in Australia, and has provided insight into the way such disasters should be handled in the future.

Veterinary practices in and around the fire affected areas responded immediately to meet the needs of affected animals, and displaced people whose animals required veterinary attention.

AVA members and the general public were concerned about the lack of a coordinated veterinary response for animals affected by the fires, particularly pets, horses and wildlife. In response to these concerns the AVA established the Veterinary Emergency Taskforce (AVA VET) to assist in coordinating a veterinary response. The taskforce activities are outlined in this submission.

The AVA remains concerned that the planning by government for management of the impact of a bushfire disaster on animals is inadequate. The AVA believes the state and territory governments must identify appropriate lead agencies to develop a comprehensive Disaster Management Plan (DMP) that includes all animals affected by bushfires in the future. This plan must be developed in consultation with other agencies and organisations that would have a role in preparing for, and responding to, such disasters.

Importantly, disaster management planning and preparedness comes at a cost. It is essential that governments recognise this and provide the necessary resources and funding to enable it to happen. We are often quick to find funding after traumatic experiences such as 'Black Saturday' and this will quite rightly continue. However, forward investment of capital in preparedness and response capabilities will be realised in the saving of lives of both people and animals, and improved welfare outcomes.

In this submission, the AVA makes a series of recommendations to the Senate Select Committee on Agricultural and Related Industries. If implemented by state and territory governments, these recommendations will address these matters and provide the assurances sought by the veterinary profession and the community that the needs of animals affected by bushfire and other disasters will be adequately managed. Much can be learned from AUSVETPLAN, the national plan designed to address outbreaks of emergency animal diseases.

The AVA commends these recommendations to the Senate Select Committee on Agricultural and Related Industries.

INTRODUCTION

The bushfire events of Saturday 7 February 2009 were unprecedented in terms of fire risk and the manner in which the fires ravaged the various areas of Victoria. In previous years, extremely damaging bushfires have also occurred in other parts of the country.

While saddened and concerned about the tragic loss of human life as a consequence of bushfires, the focus of the veterinary profession turns to the management of the health and welfare of the animals affected by fires.

The loss of wildlife is believed to be unprecedented, with the vast majority of wild animals in the path of the major fires on Saturday 7 February 2009, perishing in the blaze. In simple terms, these animals were unable to escape the intensity and speed of the fires. On the other hand, because of the large areas affected and the ongoing fire events in the weeks following the initial devastating blaze, many wild animals that were burned and injured required veterinary attention or euthanasia.

The extent of veterinary attention required for pets and horses that escaped the fires was also unprecedented. This was to be expected given the extent of property loss and the many thousands of people that had escaped the fires and were left homeless.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

About the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA)

The AVA is the national representative body for the veterinary profession in Australia, and has over 5000 member veterinarians

The AVA is a single corporate entity with a division in each state and territory and branches at the regional level. The diversity of veterinary science is catered for by 21 special interest groups within the Association. These groups include livestock, horses, pets and wildlife, and members of these groups have an interest in bushfire disasters and the management of these events in the future.

The AVA has a Board of nine Directors, and each division and special interest group has an Executive Committee to oversee and engage in activities at the division or group level.

At the national level, the AVA engages with the Federal Government and works with the divisions to engage with State Governments on issues that have an Australia wide perspective. On issues that are state or territory based and do not have a wider Australian impact, the divisions work directly with the relevant State Governments or agencies.

Health and welfare needs of animals affected by bushfires

The health and welfare needs for animals affected by bushfires, or any disaster for that matter, vary depending on the species of animal. The types of animals with similar needs can be broadly grouped as follows;

- Domestic livestock and horses
- Pets and working dogs
- Wildlife.

Each of these groups will be considered separately.

Livestock and horses

Livestock and horses are generally confined within paddocks. In some cases horses are stabled and rugged and sheep and cattle may be confined in sheds or in feedlots. Similar arrangements to sheep and cattle apply to other livestock and some livestock may also be tethered.

Following a bushfire event, livestock and horses in affected areas require the following;

- access to sufficient feed and clean water;
- relocation in a confined area, for example, a fenced paddock, so they are not able to stray;
- a veterinary inspection to establish whether:
 - they need to be immediately euthanased on welfare grounds because of the severity of their injuries
 - they are suitable for transport to an abattoir or knackery for slaughter because their injuries are such that treatment is not practicable or economically justified
 - they are expected to make a full recovery from their injuries with treatment and care from the owner and/or veterinarian
 - they are fit and well and do not require any further veterinary treatment.
- ongoing veterinary care as required following the initial veterinary assessment.

Pets and working dogs

Pets and working dogs are generally confined on a property by fencing or tethering (for example, a chain).

Their requirements are:

- suitable feed and clean water
- veterinary attention if the pet is burned or injured from the fires or showing any signs of ill health
- euthanasia if necessary on welfare grounds
- shelter from inclement weather and, where appropriate, suitable bedding
- ability to be confined in one area, for example, a fenced yard, run, or tethering
- regular attendance by an owner or carer.

Where practicable it is generally better for pets to remain with their owners following a disaster. However, where this is not practicable transfer to a shelter or boarding facility specifically designed for pets should occur. In cases where long-term veterinary care is required it may be appropriate for the animal to remain in a veterinary hospital for treatment.

Pets may be separated from their owners, and in such cases there is a need to attempt to identify and locate the owner to reunite them with their pet. Most pets are now implanted with a microchip which links them to their owner via one of the microchip registries.

Wildlife

The situation with wildlife is complex because of the destruction of habitat caused by bushfires and the vast number of species involved. Most of the animals that have survived the fires without injury will generally be able to move into nearby unaffected habitat. Where this is not the case, they will need to be rescued and cared for before being returned to the wild. This is because provision of feed to wildlife on public land is not permitted, primarily due to potential environmental damage this may cause through the introduction of plant species such as weeds, which have a major environmental and ecological effect on the area as it recovers from the fires.

Injured wildlife require rescue, veterinary assessment and shelter and care until such time as they can be released. The decision on whether or not to euthanase must be based on whether or not the animal can be successfully rehabilitated to survive in the wild, as distinct from whether or not the life of the animal can be saved. In some cases, because of the mobility of the animals (for example, kangaroos and wallabies), rescue and veterinary assessment can only be achieved through darting the animal with a tranquiliser.

Specialist treatment and care of wildlife may be required. These animals need to be located in a specialist care unit, either at a zoo or at a veterinary hospital set up to provide this care.

Disaster response responsibilities of various agencies

As the bushfire tragedy was unfolding, it was unclear which agency was taking the lead role for coordinating the disaster response in regard to the treatment and management of wildlife, domesticated and companion animals. In the future a designated 'chain of command' is essential to ensure that each agency is aware of who is responsible for coordinating disaster response to manage the health and welfare of animals affected in these situations. This is not only applicable for Victoria, but nationwide.

AVA VETERINARY EMERGENCY TASKFORCE

On 16 February 2009 the AVA established the AVA Veterinary Emergency Taskforce (AVA VET) to improve coordination of the veterinary response after the Victorian bushfires. The primary focus of the VET was to coordinate activities so that resources would end up in the right places at the right time and provide the best possible outcome for animals needing veterinary care. Importantly, the taskforce would also address the need for support for veterinarians and veterinary practices directly affected by the fires, or by their involvement in the response to the fires.

In establishing the VET, the AVA focused on the role of the veterinary profession, and did not become directly involved in activities such as coordinating supply of feed for farmed livestock, horses and wildlife, day to day rescue of animals, provision of shelter for animals, etc. The limit of AVA VET involvement in these peripheral activities was to provide technical advice or contact details for other groups.

The activities undertaken by the AVA VET were:

- liaison with government and other agencies
- volunteer management
- support for veterinarians and veterinary practices, including supplies, counselling, etc
- wildlife triage management.
- management of donations of supplies
- assembly and distribution of triage kits
- wildlife planning and management
- establishment of the Emergency Trust for donations of money
- preparation of fact sheets and other technical information relating to animal treatment and management following bushfires.

Future/ongoing activities are:

- working with the Victorian Government and other state and territory governments to ensure each jurisdiction has effective disaster management plans that include managing the health and welfare of livestock, horses, companion animals and wildlife
- ensuring the AVA is actively engaged in the development and testing process of these disaster management plans
- developing a clear and concise disaster response strategy for AVA itself to ensure that coordination and communication issues are able to be implemented immediately after, or preferably before, a disaster occurs.

CONSIDERATION OF LESSONS LEARNED FOR DISASTER PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT

The need for a structured plan for disaster management, where all agencies and organisations are fully informed, is paramount. The example of the Victorian bushfires in February 2009 shows a lack of communication and clear planning, which resulted in confusion and insufficient coordination of the management of animals affected by the disaster. The AVA VET attempted to provide some assistance in the coordination effort, and in the process, has identified a number of areas that need to be addressed in future planning for bushfire management in all areas across Australia. Comprehensive and structured planning and preparedness is the key to minimising the impact of the disaster. If we have this, we can maximise the effectiveness and efficiency of the response, and subsequent recovery.

From an AVA perspective, the key elements that need to be addressed in a Disaster Management Plan are outlined below, in four distinct stages: preparedness, mitigation, response, and recovery.

Preparedness:

The primary element of preparedness is to have the comprehensive plan available and understood by all agencies and organisations that will be involved in the disaster response.

Key aspects of preparedness include:

Communication

- Information packages are needed for people with animals affected by bushfires, or other disasters, and these need to be prepared in advance based on anticipated needs. The packages will need to be periodically reviewed and updated.
- Mechanisms for communication before, during, and after the event, including a 'blackout' situation need to be established, and plans for implementing the communications made.
- A lead agency hotline (for example, a 1300 number) needs to be available immediately when an event becomes imminent, and during the response phase for contact on veterinary response issues. In most cases this will only require someone to be available to direct the person to the appropriate agency or website for the information they need.
- An agency neutral website outlining key information and contacts on various issues is essential. This needs to be in place, and the public needs to be aware of it, prior to the event. The Emergency Management Australia website would be appropriate.

Capability

- Details of the location of veterinary practices prepared to participate in the disaster response, and after hours contact details for practice principals need to be available in advance so they can be contacted urgently. Details of the practice capability for different animal species should also be available.
- Contact lists of suitable volunteers based on skills, training and experience need to be in place so they can be contacted early and available volunteers mobilised quickly.
- Few veterinarians and veterinary nurses have experience with wildlife, so further opportunities for additional training on handling and treating wildlife are needed.

Management of veterinary supplies – purchased or donated

- Donated supplies need to be centrally managed with inventory controls and distribution arrangements. This requires advice to all those donating supplies of the arrangements in place. Veterinary supplies must be handled separately so they can be managed in accordance with the legal requirements for veterinary drugs.
- Capacity to activate the warehousing and distribution arrangements immediately is required, and details of where to send supplies need to be available in advance of the event. This capacity would be greatly enhanced if the state and territory governments could fund the wholesale veterinary drug companies to have separate Disaster Management Supplies stored at the beginning of known disaster periods for example, fire seasons or cyclone seasons, that can be mobilised immediately and deployed to the areas of need. These supply packs could have a standard inventory of drugs, bandages, fluids etc that are constantly turned over by the drug suppliers while maintaining the inventory, to ensure medication expiry dates are not breached.
- Arrangements should be in place with veterinary pharmaceutical suppliers for the acquisition of veterinary supplies that will be needed for triage kits and for distribution to veterinary practices.
- Key documentation, relating to contents of kits and their usage for triage kits needs to be readily available.

Mitigation:

Mitigation refers to the activities that occur in the lead up to a possible event that evidence suggests is likely to occur. The predominant activity is to alert people and agencies that are likely to be needed to respond so they are ready to do so.

Key aspects of mitigation are:

- Alerts for people with animals likely to be affected by bushfires, which identify the key things they need to do and direct them to further information sources.
- The activation of the lead agency 1300 hotline number prior to the response phase.
- The website outlining key information and contact details should be double checked for accuracy of contact information.
- Veterinary practices prepared to participate in the disaster response should be contacted. Their capacity for management of different animal species should be verified.
- Volunteers should be contacted to verify their availability so they can be mobilised as soon as they are required.
- Arrangements for volunteer veterinarians and veterinary nurses to be appropriately identifiable at control points that may subsequently be set up to restrict access to affected fire areas.
- Warehousing and logistics arrangements for donations of veterinary supplies need to be verified. Drug companies could be contacted at the start of a fire season and funding provided by government to ensure that preparations are in place.

Response:

This stage will involve activation of the key areas of the plan.

The lead agency needs to decide that a response is required, and the nature of the response. This should occur rapidly after a disaster event and should be based on evidence that the disaster has occurred, as well as information on the expected gravity of the event.

Once the decision to activate the response is made, the lead agency should immediately establish a Disaster Control Centre (DCC) to coordinate the overall response by the participating agencies. Arrangements of this kind are included in AUSVETPLAN, the national plan that addresses outbreaks or suspected outbreaks of emergency animal diseases (EADs). Plans for State Disease Control Headquarters (SDCHQs), Local Disease Control Centres (LDCCs) and Forward Control Posts (FCPs) are included in AUSVETPLAN.

Recovery:

This will be based on the plan and the needs originating from the event and the response.

In the case of animals, this will generally relate to the long-term care requirements.

In relation to wildlife, a further key issue is the timing of the release of the animals back into the wild. This affects the amount of time they will spend in long-term care pending their release.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Recent experience in Victoria has shown that there is a need for extremely good planning, coordination and communication in relation to the response for animals affected by bushfires. All agencies involved, possibly with the exception of the Victorian DPI, were clearly overwhelmed by the magnitude of the event. As a consequence of grossly inadequate planning for disaster management, there was a lack of coordination in the response, particularly in relation to pets, horses, and wildlife.

Ensuring there is adequate planning and preparedness for disaster management is clearly a responsibility of government and in the case of emergency management for bushfires, a responsibility of the state or territory government. This is not to say that non-government agencies should not have a designated role and be responsible and accountable for delivery of that role, provided of course that resources are available to fulfil the responsibility. The availability of resources is a matter that can and should be dealt with in the preparation of disaster management plans. The responsibility for the overall management of animals in disaster emergencies should fall to one agency within a state or territory government.

Recommendation 1:

That the Senate Inquiry include a recommendation that there be a lead agency responsible for coordinating the planning and preparedness for a response to major bushfire disasters in all states and territories. This agency needs to be properly resourced and funded to ensure adequate levels of ongoing preparedness for the overall response for animals affected by a disaster. This agency should, before an event occurs, identify other agencies and organisations that will have an assigned role in disaster management. The Australian Veterinary Association should be one of those organisations, with an assigned role pertaining to veterinary related activities.

As outlined previously, there are four key elements of an effective disaster management strategy; preparedness, mitigation, response and recovery.

A key aspect of the mitigation, response and recovery elements is effective coordination and communication. It is well known that this is best achieved through the use of an adequately resourced disaster control centre. This approach has worked well in Australia for exotic disease management, and in the case of bushfires, for the Victorian DPI response to managing farmed livestock affected by fires.

Based on the views of AVA members and the AVA's understanding of community expectations, the AVA believes that all decisions on the euthanasia of animals must be made by a veterinarian, unless there are compelling reasons otherwise. Inspectors of animal related agencies should be accompanied by a veterinarian if there is any likelihood that euthanasia might be required, so the veterinarian can make the final decision.

Recommendation 2:

That the Senate Inquiry include a recommendation that in any comprehensive disaster management plan, the response for all animals affected by major disasters, such as bushfires, must be addressed.

The plan should:

1. identify the activities needed for preparedness, mitigation, response and recovery
2. include assigned roles for agencies and organisations involved in the delivery of those activities

3. include the establishment of a DCC to coordinate the response phase of the plan
4. require that all decisions regarding the euthanasia of animals are made by a registered veterinarian unless there are compelling welfare reasons for euthanasing the animal as a matter of urgency.

Preparation for, and responding to, a disaster event requires extensive planning on the part of the lead agency, and other agencies and organisations involved. This planning and preparedness comes at a significant cost in terms of human resources and materials required by the lead agency and other agencies.

For the veterinary response, maintaining a register of suitable volunteer veterinarians and veterinary nurses, as well as additional training of some of these volunteers prepared to work in wildlife triage centres will come at a cost. Those organisations with the capacity to provide training to volunteers will need to do so all over Australia, and will need additional funding to provide these opportunities.

Other agencies with a role in the response will also incur costs for planning and preparedness for a bushfire disaster. These costs should be born by the State Government.

Recommendation 3:

That the Senate Inquiry include a recommendation that the state and territory governments provide any necessary additional ongoing funding to agencies and organisations that will have an assigned role in preparing for, and engaging in, the response to a disaster event. This is to cover any reasonable additional costs they incur to ensure an adequate level of ongoing preparedness for their contribution to the response for animals affected by bushfires.

The community expects accountability for disaster planning. It is therefore essential that the planning for, and delivery of, the preparedness, mitigation, response and recovery activities associated with managing a disaster is accountable to the community through government. In this context there needs to be mechanisms of review to ensure the lead agency and other groups with an assigned role are meeting their obligations. This should be achieved through regular independent audits of disaster planning and preparedness, and reporting to the state or territory government.

Recommendation 4:

That the Senate Inquiry include a recommendation that state and territory governments establish regular auditing arrangements for independent reviews of the planning and preparedness for bushfires and other disasters. The findings should be reported to the government and made available for public scrutiny.