

A state plan for animal welfare in emergencies: Victoria's experience in developing and implementing a state animal welfare emergency plan

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ABSTRACT

The tragic outcomes of the Black Saturday bushfires in 2009 highlighted, particularly for Victoria, the roles animals play in people's lives and the need for a state-wide, co-ordinated approach to managing animals and animal welfare in emergencies. Following the recommendations of the Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission the then Department of Primary Industries was tasked with developing and implementing a state plan for animals in emergencies. What started off as a plan to simply ensure a co-ordinated response to animal welfare in emergencies has led to a greater understanding of the importance of including animals in all aspects of emergency planning, response and recovery; not just for the animals themselves but for the safety and resilience of individuals and the community.

Introduction

In recent years there has been an increased understanding of the role played by animals in emergencies and the need to better consider them in emergency planning. But why is this so important that there is a need to change emergency arrangements that have been in place for many years and why did Victoria see the need for a state plan for animals?

Animals have always played a role in emergencies. Like humans, animals are sentient and suffer during times of emergency events. Until more recently they were mainly considered only during the recovery stage, when they needed assistance to either treat their injuries or end their suffering. There was little understanding that animals could play any other role in emergencies or impact on human survival, preparedness and resilience.

Traditionally, government agricultural departments have had a role in assisting farmers to deal with affected livestock as well as a wider rural recovery role in helping livestock producers get back to

business. The management of non-livestock species was generally left to other agencies such as local government, animal welfare organisations and veterinarians or veterinary organisations. Affected wildlife were managed by government environmental departments and wildlife groups. In times of evacuation, the advice to the community was usually that animals weren't welcome at relief or evacuation centres and should be left at home or the owner should make other arrangements.

In Victoria, prior to the Black Saturday bushfires in February 2009, such were the arrangements for animal welfare. Communications were generally informal and there was no agreed co-ordination between government (state or local) and non-government agencies such as the RSPCA or veterinary groups. When the Black Saturday bushfires hit Victoria the various government and animal welfare groups swung into action. However, they worked mainly as independent groups with no formal co-ordination between them.

Black Saturday resulted in the deaths of 173 people. More than 2 000 homes were destroyed or damaged, thousands of structures and over 10 000 kilometres of fencing were destroyed, and townships such as Marysville and Kinglake were almost obliterated. An unknown number of companion animals were killed, and it has been estimated that over 11 000 farm animals died (Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission 2010), with some reports placing losses significantly higher than that. The direct cost of livestock losses in the Black Saturday bushfires has been conservatively estimated in one report at more than \$18 million (Coll 2013). Such loss estimates don't take into account factors such as loss of animal genetic history or the impacts on the wider community and service industries.

During these fires the then Department of Primary Industries (DPI) initiated rural recovery operations involving assessment of 4 700 properties across 23 municipalities and operated several rural recovery control centres and a state rural recovery control centre.

Significant animal welfare work was also done by local government staff who were often first into the area, as well as by animal welfare agencies such as the RSPCA

and Victorian Animal Aid, Victorian Farmers Federation (VFF), Australian Veterinary Association (AVA), private veterinarians, volunteers and many others. The wildlife response was managed by the former Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) with the assistance of wildlife groups, veterinarians and volunteers. The range of stakeholders involved and lack of co-ordination meant there was significant duplication of effort in some areas and lack of assistance available in others.

While animals were not part of the scope of the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission, the final report noted that 'the co-ordination of animal relief after the fires was fragmented' and that 'there does not appear to be a co-ordinated approach to animal welfare during relief operations. Improving agency co-ordination would help to provide more effective relief to all animals regardless of whether they are wildlife, stock, companion animals or pets.' The report also stated 'There is a good argument to address the welfare of all animals holistically in the Emergency Management Manual Victoria.' (Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission 2010)

The DPI undertook its own review following the Black Saturday bushfires and identified the need to clarify its role and improve collaboration and co-ordination of agencies for future delivery of animal welfare and rural recovery activities. This review identified that with the many different agencies contributing to animal welfare services, the various groups' activities, whether voluntary or funded, required co-ordination to enable an effective response to animal welfare issues, improve use of resources, and address gaps in the delivery of response and recovery efforts.

It was not just the issue of co-ordination of animal welfare response that was identified by the Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission. It identified 'that the strong ties people have with their homes and their animals have a big impact on their decision making' (Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission 2010). Tragically during Black Saturday, as well as other disasters around the world, people have lost or risked their lives because they wouldn't leave without their animals, have delayed leaving because they were trying to contain their animals to take with them or move them to lower risk area, or went back into danger areas to get their animals.

This link between people's attachment to their animals and their behaviour in an emergency was also being recognised overseas following natural disasters such as *Hurricane Katrina*. The United States *Pets Evacuation and Transportation Standards Act 2006*, introduced after the experiences of *Hurricane Katrina*, was a prime example of the type of legislative and policy change that has happened following major disasters around the world. This Act requires that state and local emergency preparedness authorities specify how they will accommodate families with pets or service animals in their emergency plans.

At least 63 per cent of Australians own one or more pets (Animal Health Alliance 2013). Research has found that the risk of failing to evacuate increases two-fold for each additional companion cat or dog in the household (Heath *et al.* 2001) and that 90 per cent of pet owners expect to take their animals with them if they leave (Taylor *et al.* 2013). Thus animals play a significant role in how at least half of the population responds in an emergency situation, particularly when evacuation is being called for.

The important role animals play in both individual and community resilience and recovery is becoming more clearly understood. The relationships that people form with their animals, be they pets, horses or livestock, can be as important as the human relationships they have; for some people, their animals are, in fact, more important. And it is not just pets that can have this impact. In addition to economic losses, the wellbeing of individuals and entire farming communities is often severely undermined by the loss of animals and impact on livelihoods.

The health benefits animals can have for humans are well known. They can be a buffer to stress (Allen, Blascovich & Mendes 2002). Finding out about the fate of their animals is often the first priority for evacuating people, and knowing that their animals are safe can be more important than the fate of their property. Having their animals with them can also help people cope, particularly the young and vulnerable members of the community.

For Victoria, it was agreed that it would be the role of the DPI to co-ordinate any animal welfare response and that there was a need for a state-wide animal welfare emergency plan to sit underneath state emergency arrangements.

The DPI took on the task of developing and implementing the state-wide plan for animals during emergencies. A state committee, the Victorian Emergency Animal Welfare Committee (VEAWC), was established consisting of major stakeholders including state and local government, the RSPCA, AVA and the Municipal Association of Victoria. The VEAWC was integral to the development and implementation of the *Victorian Emergency Animal Welfare Plan*¹ (VEAW plan).

It was agreed that the VEAW plan had to fit into the broader emergency management structures and plans and to take an all-species, all-hazards approach. The only exemption was emergency disease situations as there are already comprehensive national systems in place under the *Australian Veterinary Emergency Plan*² or AUSVETPLAN.

The VEAW plan was developed through workshops and consultation with relevant agencies. These workshops identified key stakeholders, their interactions and roles,

1 Victorian Emergency Animal Welfare Plan.
At: www.depi.vic.gov.au/fire-and-emergencies/animals-in-emergencies/victorian-emergency-animal-welfare-plan.

2 Australian Veterinary Emergency Plan.
At: www.animalhealthaustralia.com.au/programs/emergency-animal-disease-preparedness/ausvetplan/.

issues that needed clarification, and determined what a co-ordinated response should look like.

One of the key principles of the plan is that animals remain the responsibility of their owners who have a duty of care to their animals but that in times of emergencies owners may need assistance to meet those responsibilities.

Animal welfare needs were identified to include, but not be restricted to, the following:

- identification and management of evacuated animals
- management of lost or straying animals and reunification processes to get animals back to owners as quickly as possible
- identification and assessment of affected animals in an environment where movement restrictions might be in place
- animal treatment and/or humane destruction
- emergency containment
- co-ordination of donated fodder and other goods
- provision of water and feed.

The VEAW plan was approved by the secretaries of the DPI and DSE in September 2011 and is recognised under the Emergency Management Manual Victoria.³ It links into state emergency arrangements and provides the policy and principles for use in emergency animal welfare planning, response and recovery phases. It sets up a framework that can be used in any emergency event for any species or hazard and sets out the co-ordination arrangements as well as the roles and responsibilities of the agencies likely to be involved in any animal welfare response.

The final plan also includes identification of what animal welfare services are required and the roles and responsibilities of people in charge of animals, organisations and agencies. It describes a state-wide animal welfare unit that can be established during large-scale emergencies to manage the co-ordination of agencies, organisations and volunteer groups that are involved in the animal welfare response.

Following approval of the plan, work commenced to ensure the plan was implemented into state and local government planning. Communication tools were developed to advise all stakeholders of their role in the plan and to encourage the inclusion of animals into plans at all levels, from state emergency arrangements down to animal owners.

Considerable work has been undertaken with local governments to assist them to incorporate animals into their municipal plans. State-level guidelines for managing animals in relief or evacuation centres were developed, along with a template for a local government emergency management plan. Some councils were in fact developing their plans at the same time as the state-level plan was being created. Other

local governments have subsequently grouped together to create a plan that could be adopted across their region, ensuring consistency of planning and sharing of resources. The response by local governments in Victoria has been extremely positive with the majority actively working to ensure animals are appropriately included in municipal emergency plans.

Many animal welfare stakeholders are not experienced in emergency management practices or processes. So, while the VEAW plan articulates the roles and responsibilities of the various organisations and stakeholders, there is also a need for continued education, training and discussion around how an emergency response would work. Victoria maintains a register of organisations that have capability and capacity to assist with the animal welfare response in an emergency. This provides the ability to match the needs of response agencies with those who have the skills and resources to assist them.

The other important area of work has been engagement with the emergency management community to increase their understanding of the effect animals can have on human behaviour in an emergency. This includes the need to ensure animals are better incorporated in emergency planning, and that response plans enable a timely response to address animal welfare needs.

It is important that evacuation communication doesn't discourage people from leaving by excluding animals in evacuation messages. Information should be readily available on where to evacuate to with animals. There needs to be appropriate arrangements at relief and evacuation centres for the sheltering of animals and systems for management of displaced animals to ensure they can be returned to their owners as soon as possible.

The importance of addressing animal welfare needs to end suffering is a time-critical activity following bushfire, however the need to ensure human safety can delay access to affected areas for owners and responders. Victoria has recently reviewed traffic management protocols to directly reference animals as a key consideration when identifying early access needs after bushfires to ensure that animal welfare needs are addressed as a priority.

Government and emergency agencies don't need to do all the work. They can work alongside the community and community groups that pull together in emergencies to assist animal owners. Social media platforms have been a major factor in this by providing an easily-accessible forum, through websites and Facebook pages, that can connect affected communities with those able to assist them.

The need for better planning to include animals in emergencies has also been recognised at a national level. A series of workshops between 2011–2013 was held under the auspices of the Australian

³ Emergency Management Manual Victoria.
At: www.emv.vic.gov.au/policies/emmv/.

Animal Welfare Strategy⁴ with the assistance of World Animal Protection, an organisation well-known for their international work in relation to animals in emergencies. These workshops brought together relevant jurisdictional and animal welfare representatives to work on developing state and national plans for animals in emergencies.

From these workshops, the National Advisory Committee on Animals in Emergencies was established. Their mission is 'to work collaboratively to incorporate animals into emergency management planning at all levels of government and to encourage those responsible for animals in emergencies to accept their responsibilities' (National Advisory Committee on Animals in Emergencies 2013). The first action of the committee was to develop national planning principles for animals in disasters. These provide a tool that can be used to assist jurisdictions and agencies to create animal welfare emergency plans that meet their individual needs. The committee drew on the VEAW plan for guidance in developing the principles and recommended practices. The national principles have been widely accepted, with endorsement by both the National Animal Welfare Committee⁵ in 2013 and by the Australian–New Zealand Emergency Management Committee in 2014.

Where to now for Victoria?

The VEAW plan has been in place since 2011 and will be reviewed in 2015. Since the plan's introduction, there have been major changes to Victoria's emergency response structures, policy and legislation, and it is vital that the VEAW plan fits with the broader state arrangements and remains a contemporary plan that addresses state emergency animal welfare needs.

In the short time the plan has been in place, Victoria has come to a much better understanding of the role animals play in emergencies and of the need to ensure animals are included in emergency planning, not just to prevent animal suffering, but to improve the success of the broader emergency goals of human and community safety and resilience.

More work is also needed to identify how we can better encourage animal owners and businesses to include animals in their emergency planning, be more prepared and, when an emergency threatens or high-risk days loom, to take action early to protect themselves and their animals.

The plan has been implemented during numerous bushfires but, to date, Victoria has, thankfully, not needed to implement the full state-wide arrangements for animal welfare co-ordination. However, the experience of Black Saturday 2009 is still at the

forefront of planning. Recent emergencies along with the increasing understanding of the role animals play in emergencies will be used to refine the plan to ensure it meets the expectations of the community towards animal welfare and the need to protect human and animal life.

Further information

Victorian Emergency Animal Welfare Plan and Victoria's arrangements and communications resources: At: www.depi.vic.gov.au/animalemergencies (shortly moving to www.ecodev.vic.gov.au)

National Planning Principles for Animals in Disasters: At: www.australiananimalwelfare.com.au/content/pets-and-companion-animals/national-planning-principles-for-animals-in-disastersPCA

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4 Australian Animal Welfare Strategy. At: www.australiananimalwelfare.com.au/.

5 Animal Welfare Committee is a sub-committee under the then Primary Industries Ministerial Committee. At: www.nhmrc.gov.au/health-ethics/animal-research-ethics/animal-welfare-committee-awc.