

Wildlife and fire response

Wildlife Emergency Support Network (WESN) Fact sheet for veterinarians and vet nurses 2024



Image: Zoos Victoria

Introduction

The Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) is the lead agency for managing wildlife welfare arising from bushfire.

Where required, DEECA will instigate a response operation that will be integrated into the Incident Management Team (IMT) established to manage the fire incident.

The Victorian Response Plan for Wildlife Impacted by Fire (the Plan) defines how DEECA will work with its partner agencies, contractors, wildlife welfare groups and volunteers in responding to wildlife welfare issues arising from the fire incident. The Plan sets out the standards, policies, and processes for the wildlife response to occur in a structured and coordinated way.

As defined under the Plan, the Wildlife Emergency Support Network (WESN) is a partnership for the targeted recruitment, training, accreditation and pre deployment coordination of veterinary services and wildlife rehabilitator or rescue volunteers, who can assist DEECA in undertaking response activities when requested.

This WESN approach seeks individuals from across the wildlife welfare sector including Zoos Victoria, RSPCA Victoria, Australian Veterinary Association (AVA), other veterinarians, veterinary nurses, Wildlife Victoria and wildlife rehabilitators and rescuers to participate in training and accreditation for possible deployment. It should be noted that training and accreditation does not guarantee deployment in a season or to any incident.

DEECA is developing a “Model of Cover” which determines the required number of positions that are required in each region across the State. This will be finalised in the coming months.

In 2022/23 the WESN Coordinator will be hosted by Zoos Victoria and is the key contact point for queries about how you can look to participate.

WESN Accreditation

Utilising the WESN, DEECA is looking at having trained and accredited veterinarians and vet nurses located across the state who can assist in the welfare of wildlife during fires when required.

To do so, veterinarians and vet nurses must successfully complete several mandatory training programs to allow them to be eligible for deployments and operate as a member of a team either on the fire ground or within a triage unit. This training includes online as well as face to face components.

Roles for veterinarians and vet nurses

Veterinarians and vet nurses are integral in a successful wildlife response. Veterinarians are utilised either on the fire ground or within triage units. Vet nurses are deployed exclusively to triage units. Vets and vet nurses will be Operationally led by a DEECA appointed staff member.

Veterinarians: Fire ground

Wildlife Field Assessment Teams are deployed on to and adjacent to the fire ground. They undertake the on-ground observation and assessment, euthanasia or capture and transportation of wildlife to a triage unit. As part of this team, a veterinarian would assist in these activities as well as the chemical immobilisation (darting) of animals.

Veterinarians and vet nurses: Triage units

Where required, DEECA will establish a triage unit at a facility close to the fire ground, but away from any fire operations. DEECA has standard triage unit kits ready to deploy, equipped with veterinary drugs, equipment and consumables to support the initial assessment and treatment of wildlife presenting impacted by a fire event. Resources in triage are limited, it is expected that animals are stabilised and transferred to a wildlife hospital for ongoing assessment and care.

The triage veterinarian is responsible for the assessment, treatment and euthanasia of wildlife presenting to the unit, as well as the management of scheduled drugs in line with relevant legislation.

Activities at triage units are supported by both veterinary nurses and triage assistants who have undertaken relevant training and accreditation.

Veterinary nurses support the anaesthesia and clinical assessment and care of patients in triage. As in normal clinic, the role undertakes stock management and other operational procedures, including patient record keeping. Veterinary nurses work closely with triage assistants overseeing the supportive care of animals in triage prior to transfer to a wildlife hospital.

The triage unit is led by a DEECA appointed staff member.

Deployment process

The wildlife welfare response during fire is managed by the Incident Management Team (IMT). When the IMT determines that veterinary, vet nurse and volunteer resources are required, a request will be made to the State Control Centre.

The request is then sent via the State Duty Officer Wildlife Emergencies to the WESN Coordinator. The WESN Coordinator will then seek to fulfil the request. (Refer to Figure 1).

Confirmation of health and physical fitness will also be required at the time of deployment.

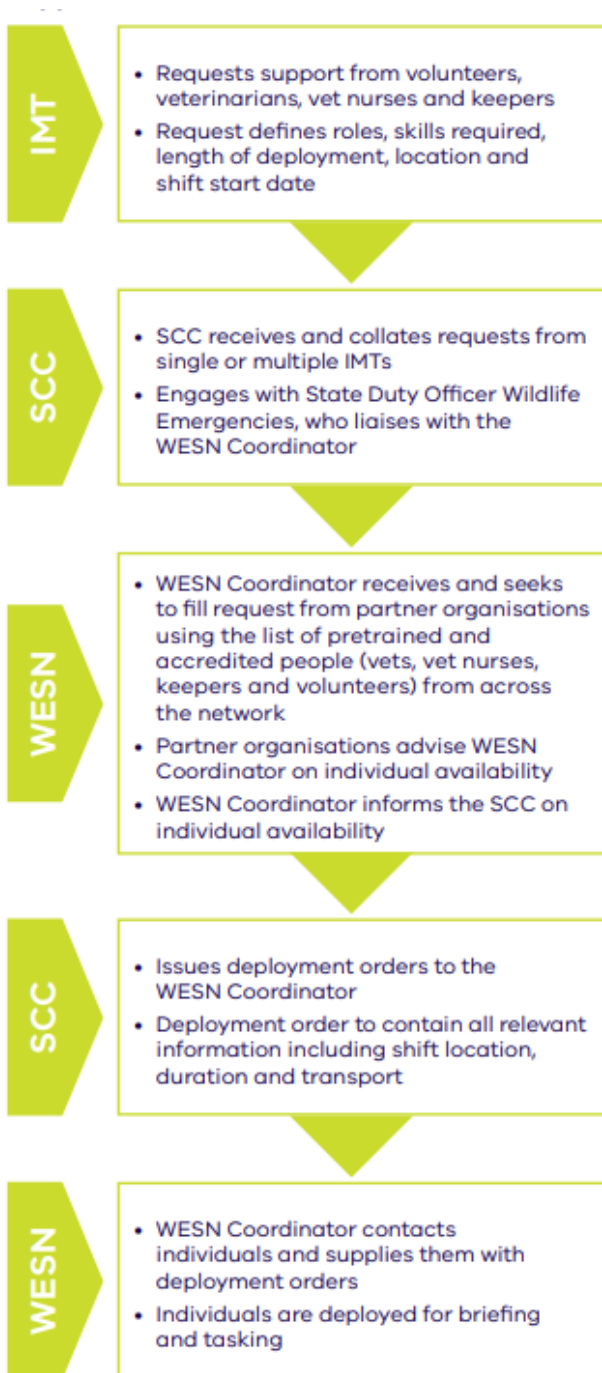


Figure 1: Deployment process of personnel through the Wildlife Emergency Support Network (source [Victorian Response Plan for Wildlife Impacted by Fire](#)).

Payment

As part of becoming part of the WESN, Veterinarians and vet nurses will be contracted to DEECA and be paid where they have been formally deployed to an emergency response incident. Payment will be for their time and include reimbursement for drugs and consumables utilised during deployment¹.

Rates have been adopted that are consistent with the Commonwealth Government for emergency response activities. These are outlined in the following table:

Item	Rates
Veterinary services	\$223.65/hour*
Vet nurse services	\$40/hour*
Travel	\$0.85/km
Consumables (including drugs)	At cost

*current rate subject to review, inclusive of GST

Length of deployment

Deployments will vary according to the location and size of the incident and will be provided at the time of the resource request; this is not a negotiable timeframe. For smaller fires within your region, you may be requested to be deployed anywhere from several hours to a number of days.

For larger or “campaign” fires which may occur over a period of weeks and where you may be asked to travel to another part of the State, deployments are generally for up to seven days. This includes five days working, with a day of travel either side.

This is consistent with other DEECA roles being undertaken as part of the response. It also aids in shift planning and allows for better fatigue management during larger incidents.

¹ More information/guidance will be provided during training.

Meals and accommodation

Accommodation and meals are provided for the duration of your deployment, if required, at no cost. This may include camp accommodation. Dietary requirements may be catered for.

Travel to and from the incident may also be arranged depending on the location.

Safety first

Veterinarians and vet nurses deployed to fires are required to work within established emergency management structures which include registration, communication and reporting procedures, as well as the use of personal protective equipment (PPE) and the adoption of hazard specific safety measures where appropriate.

Veterinary teams deploying to triage should wear their normal clinic wear that they are comfortable in. Scrubs will not be provided. Footwear must be closed toe.

Any safety issues should be reported immediately to your team leader.

For veterinarians undertaking field-based roles, fire ground PPE will be provided to you at no cost and given to individuals at the successful completion of all training. PPE remains the property of DEECA.

What is not permitted?

As a member of the response team, you must not do the following:

- be engaged in fire suppression activities, or operate in proximity to an active fire
- drive agency vehicles
- undertake tree climbing activities
- engage with the media, including social media and photos (unless approved by the Incident Controller).

More information

The [Victorian Response Plan for Wildlife Impacted by Fire](#) provides further relevant detail including:

- Roles and responsibilities
- Standards, including
 - Workplace Health and Safety
 - Fatigue
 - Zoonotic diseases
 - Critical incident stress
 - Medicals and fitness
 - Insurance
 - Working at night
- Wildlife response procedures, including:
 - Initial assessment and activation
 - Fireground assessment of wildlife.

For more information about wildlife response during emergencies or wildlife rehabilitation, please visit <https://www.wildlife.vic.gov.au/wildlife-emergencies/wildlife-fire-emergencies>.

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