

Wildlife and fire response

Wildlife Emergency Support Network (WESN) Fact sheet for volunteers 2023



Image: Zoos Victoria

Introduction

Volunteers play an important role in the assessment, rehabilitation and release of wildlife during and after emergencies. This may include supporting the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) managing wildlife welfare arising from fire.

Addressing wildlife welfare needs at a bushfire

DEECA is the control agency for managing wildlife welfare arising from fire and has new procedures for both responding to wildlife impacted by fire and to the coordination of volunteers assisting in wildlife emergency response activities.

The Incident Controller for the fire will determine if a wildlife response is required at an incident and when it should commence. If activated, all operations will be embedded in 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 and volunteers in

responding to wildlife welfare arising from the fire incident. The Plan sets out the standards, policies and processes for the response to occur in a structured and coordinated way.

Not all fires will require a wildlife response or the deployment of volunteers.

Wildlife Emergency Support Network

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.

DEECA is developing a “Model of Cover” which determines the number of trained roles that it wishes to fill, train, and maintain across the State. This will be finalised in the coming months.

In 2023 the WESN Coordinator will be hosted by Zoos Victoria and is the key contact point for DEECA and partner organisations and volunteers.

Can volunteers participate?

Under the WESN model, individuals from across the wildlife welfare sector including wildlife rescuers and authorised wildlife shelters and foster carers can nominate to volunteer as a Wildlife Field Assessment Team Member.

The number of volunteers per region will be determined by the Model of Cover.

Individuals should consider their own health and fitness when considering volunteering as this work can occur in arduous conditions.

What does a Wildlife Field Assessment Team Member do?

Volunteers are a part of a Wildlife Field Assessment Team. These teams, under the direction of an accredited agency team leader, may also include other agency staff, volunteers and a field veterinarian.

These teams go onto the fire ground to undertake a planned search for and assessment of injured wildlife. It will involve walking and working on the fire ground, manual handling and working with animals. Teams may undertake the capture of animals for further veterinary assessment away from the fire ground.

Volunteers may be required to support the euthanasia of critically injured animals and disposal of carcasses as well as the capture and handling of injured and distressed animals.

A veterinarian if part of the team and will assist in these activities as well as oversee the assessment and administer the chemical immobilisation (darting) of animals.

Training and accreditation

DELWP has legal obligations to protect the safety and wellbeing of employees and other workplace parties such as volunteers under the *Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004*.

Volunteers, like employees, need to be provided with the information, instruction, training and supervision necessary to enable them to perform their work safely and without risks to health.

To be considered for deployment, volunteers must successfully complete mandatory DEECA training and accreditation. This includes online and face to face components and is fully funded by DEECA.

It should be noted that training and accreditation does not guarantee deployment in a season or to any incident.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

Upon achieving all required accreditation for deployment, DEECA will supply volunteers with a set of fireground approved Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) at no cost.

It is expected that volunteers maintain this equipment in working condition and bring it with them on deployment.

Transporters

In some cases, there may be the need for the transport of animals from the triage unit for ongoing veterinary assessment, care and rehabilitation. Volunteers may be utilised providing it is safe to do so and access is not restricted due to roadblocks or emergency response activity. This will occur at the request of the IMT. These roles may be requested and deployed by the IMT as needed. A shift may only be for one day, transporting a small number of animals.

Transporters may be sourced from the wildlife welfare community locally and don't need to be trained or part of the WESN network.

Deployment process

The wildlife welfare response during fire is managed by the IMT. When the IMT determines that 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).

Once the deployed volunteer has arrived at the IMT and been briefed, they will be able to join their designated Wildlife Field Assessment Team.

All teams must adhere to their assigned activities. No team member is to undertake alternative activities.

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).

Length of deployment

Deployments will vary according to the location and size of the incident. For smaller fires within your region, you may be requested to be deployed anywhere from several hours to several days.

For larger or “campaign” fires which may occur over a period of weeks or months, 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.

Meals and accommodation

Volunteers do not receive any financial remuneration for their deployment. Meals and accommodation will be supplied at no cost as required. This may include camp accommodation. Travel to and from the incident may also be arranged depending on the location. Dietary requirements may be catered for.

Safety first

Volunteers deployed to wildlife emergencies 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.

Any safety issues should be reported immediately to your team leader. Mandatory fireground PPE will be provided by DEECA at no cost.

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 whilst deployed

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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