

Overview of the 2020/21 bushfire season

Introduction

This Overview is to provide the community with a summary of activity undertaken in relation to managing wildlife welfare issues arising from fire over the 2020/21 bushfire season. Due to a quiet season, the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) was not required to mobilise any wildlife response activities. However, a range of other activities have occurred to support the ongoing improvement of DELWP's response arrangements.

Preparedness for 2020/21 bushfire season

In December 2020, DELWP piloted online training for volunteers and field-based veterinarians based on the volunteer course delivered previously. The content was updated with the support of Zoos Victoria to align with the revised response procedures incorporating on ground veterinary assessment. Ten volunteers and nine veterinarians participated in this pilot. In addition, a course for triage veterinarians and veterinary nurses was also developed and trialled in conjunction with Zoos Victoria. Ten triage veterinarians and ten veterinary nurses were put through this program, which will allow them to be deployed to operate wildlife triage units as required.

Wildlife Emergency Support Network

One of the significant outcomes of the Wildlife Welfare Roundtable was the formation of the Wildlife Emergency Support Network (WESN). This is a partnership for the targeted recruitment, training, accreditation and pre-deployment coordination of veterinary services and wildlife rehabilitator, rescue volunteers and wildlife transporters. When requested through the WESN, individuals can be deployed into defined wildlife emergency roles at the request of Incident Management Teams (IMT), including:

- Veterinarians (field or triage unit based)
- Veterinary nurses
- Triage assistants (keepers)
- Wildlife volunteers (wildlife rehabilitators, rescuers or transporters).

Members of the WESN include the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA), RSPCA Victoria, independent veterinarians, veterinary nurses, wildlife rehabilitators and rescuers, Wildlife Victoria and Zoos Victoria.

Fire events and suppression

During the 2020/21 bushfire season, there were no fires of significance and the majority of fires were limited in spread and contained quickly. This result can be attributed to the effectiveness of detection and containment of fires and the relatively benign weather conditions experienced.

The season was defined by higher than normal rainfall and lower temperatures, leading to increased soil moisture and less hazardous fire conditions. This meant fires were smaller in nature, easily contained and with a low rate of spread and a reduced overall size in the landscape, leading to low impacts on wildlife habitat. This also allowed a greater opportunity for wildlife to move out of the range of fire and not become trapped or injured.

Wildlife Response

Due to the low level of significant fires during the 2020/21 bushfire season, no wildlife response activities were undertaken. However, on 13 January 2020, DELWP detected and responded to a fire in an area with a high koala population and took the pre-emptive measure to contact the WESN. The WESN Coordinator identified available team members for potential deployment and assembled the veterinary triage response gear. Fortunately, the fire was extinguished quickly, and a wildlife response was not required.

Wildlife Welfare Bushfire Response 2020 Action Plan

Co-designed with members of the wildlife welfare sector, the *Wildlife Welfare Bushfire Response 2020 Action Plan* was launched in November 2020. The plan outlines key activities to deliver improvements to standards and processes, enhance communication and public engagement and establish better ways of working across the wildlife welfare sector now and into the future.

You can track the progress of these actions [here](#).

Victorian Response Plan for Wildlife Impacted by Fire

The *Victorian Response Plan for Wildlife Impacted by Fire* was reviewed and updated as part of the Wildlife Welfare Roundtable process. This plan defines how DELWP, its partner agencies, contractors and volunteers will respond to wildlife welfare concerns arising from fire under Victoria's emergency management arrangements.

The plan can be accessed via [here](#).

Fire and wildlife exercise

On the 22 December 2020, DELWP convened key stakeholders across the wildlife welfare sector to run a training exercise to test the application of the revised *Victorian Response Plan for Wildlife Impacted by Fire*. The purpose of this exercise was to assess how appropriate personnel are notified, activated and deployed to address wildlife welfare issues arising from a fire event. The exercise also focused on how all agencies and organisations will work together during response activities under the Victorian emergency management framework. Participants were drawn from DELWP, Parks Victoria and members of the WESN, including Zoos Victoria, the Australian Veterinary Association and Wildlife Victoria.

Insights and key learnings from the exercise are summarised [here](#).

Wildlife Emergency app

DELWP has developed and released the Wildlife Emergency app to enable the public to report wildlife impacted by fire in Victoria by submitting information on species, location, suspected injury and images straight from their smart phones. Information submitted via the app will be received directly by DELWP and used to inform activities by emergency response teams. This app will be activated prior to the 2021/22 bushfire season.

Public reports made through Wildlife Victoria's call centre will be directed into the app database, ensuring DELWP receives all relevant details as quickly as possible.

The *Wildlife Emergency App* can be download from [Google Play](#) or [Apple Store](#).

Communications

A Wildlife Welfare Communications Working Group has been established as an output of the Wildlife Welfare Roundtable. This group is developing sector wide engagement and targeted communication outputs to support emergency events.

Preparing for the 2021/22 bushfire season

DELWP has commenced its preparedness for the 2021/22 fire season. This includes work within DELWP as well as through the WESN. These activities will include:

- Finalisation of “standard of cover” which is the number of trained people required for various roles across Victoria
- Training based on required numbers
- Review and update of DELWP first strike kits
- Internal standby and deployment triggers
- Engagement with WESN and preseason briefings and updates.

The WESN and wildlife community will be engaged as the various activities are rolled out.

Further Information

Further information on wildlife emergencies can be found at <https://www.wildlife.vic.gov.au/wildlife-emergencies>

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