WILDLIFE
INFORMATION
RESCUE AND
EDUCATION
SERVICE

Submission:
Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience

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About WIRES

WIRES is Australia's largest wildlife rescue organisation, and operates a dedicated Wildlife Rescue Office assisting wildlife and the community across Australia 24-hours a day, 365 days a year, providing rescue advice and assistance for over 130,000 animals annually. We have around 4,000 dedicated volunteers as well as a fleet of Wildlife Ambulances operated by full-time, professional Emergency Responders across NSW, South-East Queensland and Tasmania. These ambulances travel, on average, 40,000 kms per year and have responded to more than 11,000 rescues since October 2020.

In addition, WIRES trains hundreds of rescuers and carers annually, are dedicated to the ongoing recruitment of new volunteers and the continued training of existing volunteers. This growing network is critical for the rescue and rehabilitation of our unique native wildlife. WIRES has responded to more than 60% of all animals needing rescuing in NSW over the last 8 years. Across NSW the volunteer contribution is estimated to save the government approximately $27 million per annum and is growing.[1]

WIRES has developed partnerships and programs and provides forward-thinking national support to hundreds of projects which aim to see listed species' populations increase though protection efforts. Since the 2019-2020 summer bushfires, we have had an increasing focus on supporting projects that protect and restore threatened habitats and provide for the long-term recovery of wildlife habitat and the preservation of native species in the wild. To support and improve emergency response outcomes, WIRES is leading development of a National Wildlife Network to offer support for the hundreds of groups and thousands of volunteers across the volunteer wildlife rescue and recovery sector and their communities.

[1] Department of Planning, Industry and Environment (2020) *NSW Volunteer Wildlife Rehabilitation Sector Strategy 2020-2023*, NSW Government.

Executive Summary

During the 2019/20 Black Summer bushfires, images of burnt and burning koalas, kangaroos and other wildlife haunted nightly news footage, as did the sounds of their screams. Wildlife live with and around us, and are valued in the community. Experiences during, and responses to, recent disasters and emergencies have highlighted that there is a clear community expectation that wildlife are incorporated across disaster preparedness, planning and emergency response.

Of direct and significant importance for the Select Committee and their inquiry into Australia's disaster resilience, the extent to which community expectations are perceived as being met directly influence disaster resilience within (and beyond) effected communities and their social and emotional wellbeing. Influencing disaster resilience requires a proactive approach within and with communities — a shift from the current practices largely defined by reactive responses to discrete disaster events.

Recent experiences highlight there is a clear opportunity to do better, to build and strengthen resilience in communities — before, during and after disaster events. Government responses thus far have ineffectively taken advantage of this opportunity, with a number of policy and procedures developed/in development continuing to not meet community expectations. The implications are significant and ongoing, and will only be fully — and catastrophically — realised during and following another disaster event, unless lessons already learnt are acted upon.

What type and scale of disaster comes next are underlying questions. The ongoing and increasing impacts of climate change make their likelihood a certainty: it is not a question of if. How prepared government, departments, emergency responders are, and the processes in place to support them, will become clear. More needs to be done, and done differently.

There are two overarching themes raised in this submission: (1) Wildlife continue to not be incorporated across disaster preparedness, planning and emergency response, and (2) there is a significant, serious and ongoing risk to communities, and their disaster resilience, as a direct result — and these risks extend to first responders.

Disaster resilience and community social and emotional wellbeing underpin, and are an outcome of, these two key themes. The Select Committee is well placed to make key recommendations on the development of national principles across disaster preparedness, planning and emergency response for wildlife and the communities who care for and about them — including the development of a co-design process to ensure processes reflect community expectations, and lead to more effective on-the-ground incident management.

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Introduction

NSW Wildlife Information and Rescue Service Inc (WIRES) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the *Environment and Communications Legislation Committees Select Committee on Disaster Resilience* and contribute to the inquiry into Australia's preparedness, response and recovery workforce models, as well as alternative models to disaster recovery.

WIRES' submission takes both the terms of reference and the interim report as the starting point for outlining the current context for disaster preparedness, planning and response in communities, and the role wildlife rescue and rehabilitation in building and maintaining community resilience. A shift from a largely reactive response to discrete disaster situations, to a proactive approach which is informed by community expectations and co-designed with the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector, will ensure better outcomes. We have an opportunity to learn from past experiences with an overarching aim of doing better — before, during and after disasters.

WIRES' submission directly draws from, engages with, and builds on the findings of independent research papers and several government reports including: the CSIRO's *Climate and Disaster Resilience* report (2020), The Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment's *National Climate Resilience and Adaptation Strategy 2021-2025* (2021), the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment's *Wildlife Care in Australia Report* (2021), and the NSW Government's *Wildlife in Emergencies Sub: Plan A Sub Plan of the State Emergency Management Plan* (2023). These reports are engaged with to further inform the Select Committee on key challenges with current approaches to disaster planning, preparedness and response, and to develop recommendations which have significant potential to improve and further support disaster resilience in communities across the continent.

Resilience

The *Climate and Disaster Resilience* report, published in June 2020, refers to the United Nations definition of 'as the ability of a system, community or society exposed to hazards to resist, absorb, accommodate and recover from the effects of a hazard in a timely and efficient manner, including through the preservation and restoration of its essential basic structures and functions.'[2]

The CSIRO's more detailed companion *Climate and Disaster Resilience — Technical Report* has an entire chapter (Chapter 3) devoted to harmonisation, which involves holistically addressing resilience and adaption through coordinated action. Effective harmonisation requires leadership across sectors and building the necessary capabilities for different groups to work together. The *Wildlife Care in Australia Report* similar notes the benefits of a coordinated emergency

[2] CSIRO (2020) *Climate and Disaster Resilience*, p. 2

management response approach with communities, especially those concerned for wildlife in emergencies: "if government does not actively engage these groups they are likely to self-deploy. There is a need to manage their involvement in emergencies for the benefit of animal welfare, human physical and emotional safety, and positive environmental outcomes." A coordinated response requires "developing clarity on roles and responsibilities in advance of emergencies" which is identified to be of critical importance to managing the "expectations of the community" and volunteers intent on helping wildlife. [3]

Wildlife and resilience

Wildlife, the value, consideration and care provided to them are importance elements of disaster resilience. Yet, discussion of wildlife and communities are a frequent and glaring omission from key reports — including the Select Committee's *Terms of Reference* and *Interim Report*. The Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment's *National Climate Resilience and Adaptation Strategy 2021-2025*, subtitled *Positioning Australia to better anticipate, manage and adapt to our changing climate* similarly does not include direct reference to wildlife.

The CSIRO's *Climate and Disaster Resilience* report makes only passing reference to wildlife, with no discussion of the importance of wildlife to communities and the development and maintenance of disaster resilience.

WIRES' submission draws on emerging research, including in the wake of the 2019-202 bushfires, to reflect on lessons learnt and the development of more effective emergency management and response processes — in particular how wildlife and community resilience are interlinked and shaped by processes and procedures. The *Wildlife Care in Australia Report* explicitly reflects on the risks of current approaches to communities and their resilience, drawing on the experiences of fire affected communities. For example, in terms of increased potential for community members to place themselves and others at significant risk during disasters: "if there were structures in place the wildlife rehabilitators and the general community would be less inclined to go in there knowing that somebody is going in there and somebody is looking after these animals"[4].

The direct implications of current emergency management procedures — and an increased likelihood of self-deployment and significantly increased risk for individuals and first responders — is clear in research published in March 2024.[5] For example, of the estimated 46.8 million marsupials inhabiting the fires zones of the 2019-202 Black Summer Bushfires, only 889

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[3] DAWE (2021) *Wildlife Care in Australia Report*, p. 15

[4] DAWE (2021) *Wildlife Care in Australia Report*, p. 21

[5] Cope et al (2024) Trends in Rescue and Rehabilitation of Marsupials Surviving the Australian 2019–2020 Bushfires, *Animals* 14, 1019, https://doi.org/10.3390/ani14071019

rescues were reported. The very low number of rescues, with survival rates of around 50% and significantly lower (species dependent), will foster an increased concern that current processes are inadequate, may lead to further self-deployment and associate risks.

With a peak rescue period of 6–8 weeks after fire ignition in NSW, the implications of current processes are clear. The non-inclusion of the expertise of the wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector is a clear driver of delays, presenting a significant and ongoing risk of specific concern to communities, and direct implications for disaster resilience. In addition, rescues were mostly clustered around the edge of the fire zone, again reflecting the significant limitations and negative impacts of current emergency management decision making processes.

The analysis presented in the *Wildlife Care in Australia Report* and the recently published research paper *Trends in Rescue and Rehabilitation of Marsupials Surviving the Australian 2019–2020 Bushfires* highlight the importance to this Select Committee of considering wildlife in disaster planning, preparedness and response — and incorporating the expertise of the wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector. The Select Committee has an opportunity to address the shortcomings of the current processes, and more directly reflect the value of wildlife in and for communities and their disaster resilience.

National Principles

The development of national principles underpins effective and coordinated approaches for disaster preparation, planning and resilience, more-so across state borders — borders which are geographically arbitrary.

WIRES is providing leadership in the development of a National Wildlife Network to facilitate the implementation of a best-practice approach based on core principles and protocols for the wildlife rescue and recovery sector in emergency response — drawing on the significant and developing experience of the volunteer rescue and rehabilitation sector across multiple disaster events. This ongoing work of WIRES reflects the need for national principles — which the Select Committee is well placed to recommend — and the ongoing existence of a significant void left by limited collaborative work from governments across Australia.

The Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment's *Wildlife Care in Australia Report* (2021) recommending the adoption of national principles provides an example of foundational work by the federal government, with the report directly calling for better integration of 'wildlife responses into emergency management, planning, response, and recovery through the Australasian Inter-Service Incident Management System (AIIMS) and state/territory government wildlife emergency plans.' This call echoes the report of the *Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements*.[6]

[6] Commonwealth of Australia (2020) *Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements report*, p. 355.

National principles which facilitate the integration of wildlife emergency response into disaster management processes have clear and direct benefits for community resilience. They are a fundamental component, as evidenced across multiple inquiries and government reports referred to in this submission.

The expertise of the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector has been specifically and directly referred to as a key component of effective emergency management processes to support communities and strengthen resilience. For example, the *Wildlife Care in Australia Report* provides clear recognition of the value of the sector, which continues to operate at significant avoided costs to governments across Australia, and that the expertise in the sector must be drawn on in the development of national principles to better support more effective outcomes.

An overarching aim of an effective approach, including best practice national principles, is to reduce the number of wildlife of sick and injured wildlife requiring care. There are direct flow on benefits to communities and their disaster resilience — a key focus of the Select Committee and this Inquiry.

Terms of Reference

On 30 November 2022, the Senate resolved to establish a Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience to inquire into and report on:

(a) current preparedness, response and recovery workforce models, including:
    (i) the role of the Australian Defence Force in responding to domestic natural disasters,
    (ii) the impact of more frequent and more intense natural disasters, due to climate change, on the ongoing capacity and capability of the Australian Defence Force,
    (iii) the impact on the Australian Defence Force in responding to domestic natural disasters, and
    (iv) the role of Australian civil and volunteer groups, not-for-profit organisations and state-based services in preparing for, responding to and recovering from natural disasters, and the impact of more frequent and more intense natural disasters on their ongoing capacity and capability;
(b) consideration of alternative models, including:
    (i) repurposing or adapting existing Australian civil and volunteer groups, not-for-profit organisations and state-based services, and
    (ii) overseas models and best practice;
(c) consideration of the practical, legislative, and administrative arrangements that would be required to support improving Australia's resilience and response to natural disasters; and
(d) any related matters.

Interim Report

The Senate Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience was originally scheduled to present a final report in September 2023. With an extension of the reporting date to April 2024, an interim report was released. The interim report included the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1
1.68 The Senate Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience recommends that the House of Representatives Economics Committee examine insurance companies' handling of flood payouts.

Recommendation 2
1.70 The Senate Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience recommends that a parliamentary inquiry be established into land planning with respect to natural disaster resilience.

Recommendation 3
1.72 The Senate Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience recommends that, in light of the current Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding (Colvin Review), the Review considers evidence provided to the Select Committee around the need to use funds to build back better and standardise a regime across the States and Territories.

Recommendation 4
1.73 The Senate Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience recommends that the Independent Review of National Natural Disaster Governance Arrangements (Glasser Review) look at the current COMDISPLAN and the triaging of emergencies in light of its impact on the Australian Defence Force.

Key contributions of this submission

WIRES' submission to the *Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience* provides a number of key contributions to the process of improving disaster resilience across the continent, including ensuring the terms of reference and the interim report recommendations are fit for purpose.

The four recommendations included in the interim report — and the text of the report itself — include no mention of wildlife, the communities who care for them, and their importance to the broader public. Such an omission is, unfortunately, not an outlier. The *National Climate Resilience and Adaptation Strategy 2021-2025* (the Strategy), subtitled *Positioning Australia to better anticipate, manage and adapt to our changing climate* similarly does not include direct reference to wildlife.

These repeated omissions, intentional or otherwise, sit in stark contrast to community perceptions of wildlife and expectations on government. Such non-consideration — in the terms of reference and interim report, and other strategy documents and reports — presents a

significant shortcoming and an opportunity. An opportunity WIRES' submission embraces, and a theme central to this submission.

Engagement with communities in the wake of multiple disaster events has clearly illustrated that wildlife play a key role in community disaster resilience. There are improved outcomes for communities across disaster preparedness, planning and response when the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector are supported and included in government processes. In addition, an ability of government to draw on the expertise and capabilities of the sector is a key determinate of effective responses.[7]

The development of the NSW Government's *Wildlife in Emergencies Sub: Plan A Sub Plan of the State Emergency Management Plan* (the NSW Sub Plan) — publicly released in January 2024 — provides a clear illustration of the recognition of the value of the wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector to government planning and operations. As do numerous government inquiries and reports, including the 2020 report of *Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements* and the 2021 *Wildlife Care in Australia Report*.

The NSW Sub Plan provides a baseline for the development of effective national principles, principles which require co-design with key stakeholders — including the wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector— to ensure their effectiveness *on the ground*. WIRES is already providing leadership in the development of a National Wildlife Network, drawing on more than three decades of experience supporting communities. In addition, WIRES has achieved international recognition of organisational expertise, capabilities and capacity to support communities and the wildlife they care for during and following disasters and emergencies.

WIRES decades-long experience, organisation capabilities and expertise directly inform this submission to the *Select Committee on Australia's Disaster*, and WIRES contribution to the development of an effective nation-wide approach to preparing for, planning and responding to disasters to support communities and the wildlife they care for.

With WIRES already undertaking and providing disaster preparedness, planning, response and resilience support to groups and communities across the country, the substantive organisational experience and expertise presents an opportunity and a resource for the Select Committee to directly draw on in developing co-design process on Australia's disaster resilience.

[7] Rogers et al (2023) State agency responses to support biodiversity recovery following the 2019–20 wildfires, in Rumpff et al, Eds (2023) *Australia's Megafires: Biodiversity Impacts and Lessons from 2019-2020*, CSIRO Publishing, pp. 299-312.

Communities, Wildlife, and Disaster Resilience

The concern for, and immense value of, wildlife to local communities is a too-often non-considered element of disaster planning, preparedness and response by government at all levels across Australia. Such non-consideration often sits in stark contrast to the findings and recommendations of government inquiries and reports, and broader research and analysis.

The outpouring of concern for wildlife during and after the 2019-20 Black Summer bushfires was reflected in national and international media coverage. The breadth and scale of the world-wide response was surpassed only by the scale of lives lost, depth of grief in communities and the decades long impacts — many of which are yet to be determined.

Scientific research conducted in the aftermath of the 2019-20 Black Summer bushfires, including by the National Environmental Science Program's Threatened Species Recovery Hub, with support from the Australian Government,. This extensive research was collated in a 488-page edited book titled *Australia's Megafires: Biodiversity Impacts and Lessons from 2019–2020*, published by the CSIRO in 2023. Detailed analysis of the impacts of the fires directly and specifically included what can and must be done better for communities. In particular, the chapter titled *State agency responses to support biodiversity recovery following the 2019–20 wildfires* noted:

> Developing and implementing emergency response plans and strategies that more effectively coordinate and guide efforts across stakeholder groups is critical to ensuring resources are available and targeted towards the protection and recovery of priority natural values. The enormous community concern about wildlife and threatened species, particularly in relation to the wildfires in eastern and southern Australia, was outside many of our experiences, and while this provided an enormous impetus for agencies to mobilise significant resources towards recovery, it also challenged some with how best to respond and support the desire of the community to contribute meaningfully. This was particularly the case for wildlife rescue operations.[8]

There are two key themes in this excerpt: a need for improved and effective coordination of disaster response; and the widespread importance and impacts of concern for wildlife before, during and following disaster and emergency events. Both are central to disaster resilience and provide a pathway for a more effective community-centred approach. An approach that implicitly and explicitly recognises the importance of wildlife for disaster planning, preparedness and response — and the importance of wildlife for and to community disaster resilience.

[8] Rogers et al (2023) State agency responses to support biodiversity recovery following the 2019–20 wildfires, in Rumpff et al, Eds (2023) *Australia's Megafires: Biodiversity Impacts and Lessons from 2019-2020*, CSIRO Publishing, pp. 310-11.

The implications of not including the expertise of the volunteer wildlife rescue and recovery sector in emergency management and incident response is clear in research into the 2019-202 Black Summer Bushfire response, published in March 2024. Of the estimated 46.8 million marsupials inhabiting the fires zones of the 2019-2020 Black Summer fires in NSW, only 889 rescues were reported. What amounts to a staggering figure of less than 0.002% of those impacted.

Further indicative of the lack of an integrated incident management response to engage the expertise of the wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector, the peak rescue period was 6–8 weeks after fire ignition in NSW — long after most animals would have perished, leading to unimaginable impacts on animal welfare. Impacts which could have been significantly reduced by an integrated response.

Across the 2019-20 Black Summer bushfires, previous disaster events in Australia and internationally, examples have emerged of community members risking serious injury — and their lives — to assist wildlife. There are numerous images of people rescuing and caring for burnt and burning koalas, kangaroos and other wildlife — which haunted nightly news footage around the world, as did the sounds of their screams. These examples are illustrative of the willingness of communities to care for wildlife, the risks they are prepared to take, and their importance of doing so.

If current emergency response processes continue without integration of the expertise of the wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector, community perceptions and trust in the process will continue to deteriorate. There is a parallel potential for a repeat of self-deployment, possibly at an increased scale, and associated risk to individuals and communities — and the first responders who come to their aid.

These examples indicate the scope and scale of risk, and challenges faced by disaster planning, preparedness and response to ensure community and first responder safety. There is a need for change, and a coordinated approach across the continent with the development of national principles. As noted in the Wildlife Care in Australia Report, further impacts on trust in government responses will directly impact community disaster resilience.

Linking the above CSIRO-published research with the terms of reference for the Select Committee — particularly a (iv) — and Recommendation 3 (1.72) of the Interim Report, the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector has been directly identified as playing a crucial role in supporting communities, the wildlife they live with, amongst, and care for. The research notes that clear changes are needed across disaster planning, preparedness and response.

The NSW Sub Plan provides an example of some changes of being implemented (see next section). The Sub Plan, however, is also indicative of short-comings implicit of a departmental approach which has lacked a consultative approach with key stakeholders. More importantly, the limited functional effectiveness of emergency response when processes are undertaken without a co-design process, and the associated impacts on communities and disaster resilience.

If departmental approaches continue which do not engage with communities and the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector which supports them, first responders, agencies and government will continue to face challenges and a reduced ability to ensure effective and life-preserving and live-saving outcomes — as identified in both the report following the *Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements* and the *Wildlife Care in Australia Report*.

There is a clear opportunity for governments across the country to engage with the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector to develop targeted, community-focussed and respected approaches. Such engagement is the cornerstone of developing a standardised regime and national principles, through a co-designed process — which benefits everyone.

Operational challenges and a more effective approach

The NSW Sub Plan outlines emergency management arrangements, specifically for emergencies which also affect wildlife in NSW (wildlife in emergencies). Recognition that emergencies affect wildlife and the communities who live around and with them is fundamental to working to improve Australia's disaster resilience. *Section 3.3.3 Community Resilience* of the NSW Sub Plan directly addresses the importance of wildlife to community resilience through disaster planning, preparedness and response. As a component of the preparedness phase of emergency management, the NSW Sub Plan describes that factoring in wildlife in emergency response can lead to earlier disaster warnings, improve response rates and outcomes for wildlife rescue and rehabilitation.

Providing information to communities supports them to respond to wildlife in emergencies and to improve their social and emotional wellbeing. Further, tailoring emergency planning strategies to the specific consequences of different wildlife impact scenarios and outcomes are an important component of the prevention and preparedness phases of emergency management.[9]

Whereas the direct recognition that emergencies affect wildlife and the communities who live around and with them, process and procedural elements of the NSW Sub Plan fall short in terms of effective approaches, including taking advantage of the capabilities and expertise of the wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector. There are positives which reflect findings of the *Wildlife Care in Australia Report*, including 'having formal strategies for activating wildlife responses'.[10] For example, the response is led by an Incident Controller (IC) who will determine when and what response is initiated and mobilised. Under the direction of the IC is an Incident Management

[9] EnvsFa (2023) *Wildlife in Emergencies Sub: Plan A Sub Plan of the State Emergency Management Plan*, NSW Government, 13 December, pp. 8, 10.

[10] DAWE (2021) Wildlife Care in Australia Report, p. 15.

Team (IMT) which includes a Technical Advisor Wildlife (TAW) role. However, following release of the NSW Sub Plan, limited operational detail has been shared about the role of Wildlife Emergency Response Teams (WERT) and their activation.

The crucial importance of WERTs and timely access to ensure improved outcomes for wildlife is directly evidenced in recently published research, which provided a focussed analysis of emergency management responses to the Black Summer bushfires. A key finding of the research was that access restrictions to firegrounds under existing emergency management procedures led to very poor outcomes for wildlife and their welfare. The majority of rescues were delayed by up to 6-8 weeks after fires commenced and were restricted to the edges of fires zones. Of the estimated 46.8 million marsupials inhabiting the fire zones in NSW, only 889 rescues were reported. Many animals who survived the fires would have succumbed to their injuries during that time. In addition, compared to previous fire events, survival rates were also much lower for animals rescued, linked to extensive delays in access.[11] Koala, for example, were found who were dying from starvation, dehydration, smoke inhalation and other hazards several weeks after fires had passed.[12]

An implication of the development of NSW Sub Plan without effective consultation with the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector are impacts on community confidence in emergency management for wildlife. As the report of *Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements* noted, 'in many instances wildlife rescue or protection efforts were initiated outside emergency services' and when community members self-deployed into fire zones, alongside direct personal risk, such actions can complicate formal operational responses and negatively impact outcomes.[13]

Despite the extensive experience, capabilities and expertise of the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector — which continues to operate and provide essential services to communities at a substantial avoided cost to government — the operation plans and processes included in the NSW Sub Plan are not the outcome of a co-design process. In addition, the sector was not involved at any stage during the process of developing the plan and response processes. This lack of consideration and consultation impacts the potential for an effective approach, will lead to ongoing operational challenges in NSW, and reflects the IMT not including a representative from the wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector.

Important to note here, it is the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector which actively manages wildlife rescue and rehabilitation during and after emergency events, directly supports

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[11] Cope et al (2024) Trends in Rescue and Rehabilitation of Marsupials Surviving the Australia 2019-2020 Bushfires, *Animals* 14, 1019.

[12] Cristescu & Frere (2020) Scientists find burnt, starving, koalas weeks after the bushfires, *The Conversation*, 16 March, https://theconversation.com/scientists-find-burnt-starving-koalas-weeks-after-the-bushfires-133519

[13] Commonwealth of Australia (2020) *Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements report*, p. 355, 360.

the community and provides all the associated infrastructure — across communication channels, logistics, medical care, supplies and transportation.

The example from NSW and the development of the Sub Plan highlights a learning opportunity for the Select Committee, the federal, state and territory governments across Australia.

Directly engaging the wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector in the process of developing procedures will ensure key expertise and capabilities are integrated and lead to more effective outcomes. Sector engagement through a co-design process will assist in the development of principles and approaches underpinning operational structures, decision making and implementation of plans.

Capacity, Surge Capacity and a need for support

A longstanding challenge across disaster events is surge capacity. The volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector faces significant challenges, which are often exacerbated by operational challenges in working with ineffective government processes — processes which directly impact communities and the wildlife they live with, amongst and care about. Data from the 2019-20 Back Summer bushfires illustrate that access to assist seriously injured animals was restricted by NSW agencies by up to six weeks, leading to a significant increase in poor welfare outcomes for wildlife, and an increased loss of life.[14] These are lessons which must be learnt from to improve disaster resilience in communities across Australia.

Whereas the scope and scale of the 2019-20 Back Summer bushfires were unprecedented, the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector are experiencing similar implications across other wildlife emergency events. For example, (1) the impact of heat street events on threatened Flying fox species, (2) climate change impacts on food sources for threatened Flying Fox species and (3) Lorikeet Paralysis Syndrome (LPS) are requiring unprecedented industrial-scale responses.

The wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector, and the volunteers who are crucial to providing the care required, can now have hundreds of animals into their care, a tenfold or more increase. In February 2024 the numbers of Lorikeets taken into care in Northern NSW with LPS overwhelmed carers across capacity, social and emotionally and financially — all at an avoided coset to government. There are direct implications for community disaster resilience.

A similar situation was faced by carers with recent heat stress events for flying foxes. With hundreds coming into care, requiring long hours of food preparation each day, extended hours of care, and suitable facilities to house them over several months. The situation is dire. Whereas such incidents would previously occur on a smaller scale and only during warmer months — with

[14] Cope et al (2024) Trends in Rescue and Rehabilitation of Marsupials Surviving the Australian 2019–2020 Bushfires, *Animals* 14, 1019, https://doi.org/10.3390/ani14071019

time in between for carers to take stock and manage their social and emotional wellbeing — the increasing impacts of climate change are leading to significant periods of scarcity in food sources, with a significant increase in Flying Fox pups coming into care throughout the year.

Alongside the direct impacts on threatened species of flying foxes (linked to ongoing habitat destruction, as the key threatening process), the mass loss of life and time required for care are having detrimental impacts on the resilience of carers and the broader community. An industrial-scale in the number of animals requiring care is turning what was previously experienced as short-term surge capacity into a rolling-norm.

Caring for sick and injured wildlife is provided at a significant avoided cost to government, with the resilience of the sector becoming more precarious. There is significant risk to government, communities and the wildlife they live with and amongst.

National Principles

In discussing the development of 'clear and consistent national guidance on rescue and treatment of wildlife' the report of *The Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements* described the integration of wildlife organisations into state and territory emergency management arrangements as 'varying'. In addition, first responders were described as have a limited understanding of arrangements of the benefits of the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector during emergency events, and a lack of transparent integration impacts on community confidence in emergence response process and practice. In short, there is scope to enhance capabilities.

The report was clear that:

> State and territory governments should ensure that effective wildlife response and recovery capabilities are developed and integrated into emergency planning processes for natural disasters. [15]

Reflecting the report of the Royal Commission, Recommendation 3 of the Select Committees' Interim Report is clear on the need to standardise a regime across the States and Territories or, in other words, develop baseline national principles. National principles for wildlife emergency response are of significant benefit to wildlife and the communities who live around and with them. A national protocol-based approach will directly assist communities in strengthening resilience, founded on a clear understanding that they have and can expect effective government support in times of crisis.

[15] Commonwealth of Australia (2020) *Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements report*, p. 360.

National principles integrating the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector into emergency response will assist with the safe and swift deployment of wildlife first responders, improve welfare outcomes for wildlife, and strengthen resilience within communities. By extension, clear processes and transparent integration into emergency response will significantly reduce a perceived need within communities to self deploy — and in doing so risk their lives to ensure that wildlife are considered and cared for. Self-deployment, without the support of IMTs, can complicate emergency management operations, introduce further risk and increase the potential for adverse outcomes.

The need, importance and value of national principles is explicit in the *Wildlife Care in Australia Report*, being the first recommendation put forward — "That consideration be given to developing shared national principles for native wildlife in emergency management systems" — and reflected in the report of *The Royal Commission in National Natural Disaster Arrangements*.

In lieu of the development of holistic and effective processes across disaster planning, preparedness and response, WIRES has significantly invested in leading the development of a National Wildlife Network which offers support to communities, wildlife carers and volunteer rescue and rehabilitation organisations across Australia in the development and adoption of best practice. WIRES has undertaken this work, at significant and ongoing cost, in consultation with communities and the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector — directly reflecting the need for urgent and immediate action to be taken. These leadership and support WIRES is providing fills an ongoing void left by Government and Departments nation-wide.

This Select Committee is well placed to draw on the work already undertaken across the sector, including the leadership of the National Wildlife Network, to inform the forthcoming recommendations. Further, the Select Committee is specifically situated to recommend to governments across Australia the importance of working with communities and the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector in a co-design process to develop and standardise a best practice approach to supporting disaster resilience in communities.

Important lessons can be learnt from the development of the *NSW Wildlife in Emergencies Sub Plan*, including impacts and implications of emerging processes resulting from a lack of engagement and consultation with the sector — more so when there were clear opportunities for a co-designed and co-created process to develop the plan. A process which would have led to more robust, clearer, and effective principles and approaches, for the benefit of all involved.

Another clear and ongoing limitation of the NSW Sub Plan process to date is that a volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector representative with emergency response experience is not a required member of an IMT. There is a lack of transparency from respective government departments regarding (1) why this is the case, and (2) who within these respective departments could provide effective advice, with a direct outcome being that such expertise is missing from IMTs.

Working with First Nations Communities

Engagement with First Nations communities, including co-design of policy and practice, must be a key component in the development of national principles. Effective principles will respect First Nations culture, sovereignty of knowledge and practice, and include ongoing inclusion of First Nations communities in decision making. In addition, co-design will allow for integration of First Nations knowledge and expertise to increase the effectiveness of approaches and better outcomes for wildlife and the communities who live around and with them.

The CSIRO published *Australia's Megafires* includes a chapter on State responses, which directly referred to the response of the Victorian government as a clear example of such an inclusive, culturally informed approach. An approach which prioritised First Nations social and emotional wellbeing through "supporting programs to enhance connection to, and health of, Country. This included Traditional Owner-led assessments, and actions to heal Country."[16]

Recommendation 2 of the *Wildlife Care in Australia Report* is similarly clear — if far from strong enough in is language and framing — on the importance of and the involvement of First Nations communities in developing emergency response and disaster resilience processes: "That consideration be given to any national principle development explicitly recognising Indigenous knowledge and land managers."

Broader implications

Across Australia as the intensity and frequency of disaster events increase due to multiple, intersecting and reinforcing impacts of climate change, there is a crucial need for effective processes across preparedness, planning and emergency response to develop and support disaster resilience. Experiences during the 2019-2020 black summer bushfires, and the many disasters events since, have clearly highlighted the importance of the wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector to community resilience.

A changed disaster environment

We are already experiencing and increased frequency and type of emergency and disaster events. The 2019-2020 black summer bushfires and multiple flood events have also destructively illustrated significantly larger breadth and scale, length and impact of disaster events. A need to build further capacity, scale and requisite expertise are key findings of multiple state and federal inquiries, including *The Royal Commission in National Natural Disaster*

[16] Rogers, D.J. et al (2023) State agency responses to support biodiversity recovery following the 2019–20 wildfires, in in Rumpff et al, Eds., *Australia's Megafires: Biodiversity Impacts and Lessons from 2019-2020*, CSIRO Publishing, p. 306.

Arrangements, independent research and the experiences on-the-ground of first responders, incident management teams, and the communities affected.

With the ongoing impacts of climate change continuing significantly unabated, there is a strong likelihood that these impacts, including the scope, frequency and intensity of disaster events will increase. As will the importance of building and support community resilience.

Wildlife in emergencies v wildlife emergencies — an opportunity for government

Government and department responses in the wake of recent disaster events illustrate a focus on wildlife in emergencies. The Black Summer bushfires, and following events in northern NSW and Queensland, provide clear and specific examples. Much of the research has similarly focussed on wildlife in emergencies, repeated throughout the CSIRO published *Australia's Megafires: Biodiversity Impacts and Lessons from 2019-2020*.

Less considered to date, though an ongoing and increasing concern are wildlife emergencies. Lorikeet Paralysis Syndrome (LPS) events and grey-headed flying fox heat stress events are two contemporary examples. Examples which directly reflect community concern for wildlife, and examples which has direct impacts on community disaster resilience.

In parallel, a less-known implication of wildlife emergencies is the increasing burden on the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector. The impacts of LPS and heat stress events have led to a dramatic increase in lorikeets and grey-headed flying foxes coming into care. Carers have described the scope of recent wildlife emergencies as *industrial* in scale. The number of animals coming into and requiring care have increased from dozens to hundreds — and even thousands.

The increase in the burden on carers, at an avoided cost to government, is both significant and presents a substantial and ongoing risk. The *industrial* scale of the number of animals requiring care is directly illustrative of a need to build capacity, government support for the sector, and the fundamental importance of both to disaster resilience in and across communities.

The *Inquiry into the Veterinary workforce shortage* in New South Wales has highlighted an emerging crisis. Alongside volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation providers, veterinary professionals are over-stretched and facing an increase in demand. The changing disaster environment and its impacts on wildlife illustrate a crucial and increasing need for the expertise and involvement of veterinary professionals.

Alongside wildlife in emergencies, the still largely under-considered impacts of wildlife emergencies illustrate a clear need for government support processes and mechanism to build and maintain community resilience. There is a clear opportunity to develop processes and mechanisms during wildlife emergencies. Such processes and mechanisms can be field tested in

specific contexts and the lessons learnt can be applied to broader and larger wildlife in emergency scenarios.

Government support for the volunteer wildlife rescue and recovery sector and the veterinary professionals who care for wildlife are foundational cornerstones of community resilience. Support which reflects the value communities place on wildlife is essential to ensure trust and faith in emergency response, especially during disaster events.

Conclusion: Omission comes with a cost — and an opportunity

WIRES' submission to the *Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience* provides the Select Committee with key insights drawn from the expertise and experience of the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector. Sharing these insights present the Select Committee with an opportunity to strengthen Australia's disaster resilience.

The Terms of Reference and the Interim Report are used to frame WIRES' submission, alongside key research and government-departmental responses to disaster events —— primarily following and responding to lessons learnt in the wake of the 2019-200 Black Summer bushfires.

These reports and publications include the CSIRO's *Climate and Disaster Resilience* report (2020), The Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment's *National Climate Resilience and Adaptation Strategy 2021-2025* (2021), the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment's *Wildlife Care in Australia Report* (2021), the NSW Government's *Wildlife in Emergencies Sub: Plan A Sub Plan of the State Emergency Management Plan* (2023), the CSIRO-published 488 page collection of scientific research titled *Australia's Megafires: Biodiversity Impacts and Lessons from 2019-2020* and the report of *Royal Commission into National Disaster Arrangements*.

An unfortunate and common theme across many government-departmental reports and processes is either a complete omission or incomplete consideration of wildlife in emergencies. Such omissions do not reflect community sentiment. The widespread and unprecedented level of national and international concern which emerged during the 2019-2020 Black Summer bushfires is indicative and reflective of the value of wildlife for the local communities who live around and with them.

These common omissions, intentional or otherwise, present the Select Committee with an opportunity. It is an opportunity WIRES' submission has embraced, and reflects WIRES' leadership in developing a National Wildlife Network. Increasingly acknowledged by governments and their departments, when the wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector are supported and included in government processes outcomes are much more effective. An increased ability of government to draw on the sector is a key determinate of this effectiveness.

One key takeaway for Select Committee is that an awareness that the safety and welfare of wildlife directly inform emergency preparedness, planning and emergency response supports and strengthens community disaster resilience. Further, an awareness that safety and welfare of wildlife directly inform emergency preparedness — including actions taken in real-time, reduce concern and frustration amongst communities and the potential for individual to self-deploy to disaster locations. Self-deployment presents a direct risk to life for individuals, increased risk to first responders, and can require a refocus in the deployment of limited and in-demand resources during disaster events.

As the *Wildlife Care in Australia Report* notes, national principles which clearly and explicitly include wildlife emergency response reassure communities and can significantly reduce the potential of self-deployment, risk to life and diversion of emergency management resources. Reducing the number of sick and injured wildlife requiring care directly benefits community disaster resilience.

With the ongoing absence of clear and effective processes and national principles, WIRES is leading development a National Wildlife Network to (1) build on the lessons learn during recent disaster events and the expertise developed, (2) further develop outcomes-focussed collaboration and support for the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector across Australia, and (3) collaborate on a standardised best-practice approach developed through a co-design process.

To ensure that National Principles (1) draw on the expertise and experience of the wildlife rescue and recovery sector, (2) are effective, and (3) reassure communities, government planning and processes must embed co-design and co-creation with the volunteer wildlife rescue and recovery sector from the outset. Implications of not doing so are currently playing out in NSW with the recently released *Wildlife in Emergencies Sub: Plan A Sub Plan of the State Emergency Management Plan*. The situation provides a clear lesson of what can be done better, with the implications including a lack of faith in the process, concerns relating to the effectiveness of processes and associated actions in the Sub Plan, and an increased potential for self-deployment and associated risks.

Of direct importance to the Select Committee are the impacts and implications for disaster resilience within and across communities — a key focus of this inquiry.

Recommendations

1. A co-design process be developed to determine national principles for disaster planning, preparedness and response for wildlife in emergencies — with the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector.

2. The development of national principles, via this process, must be based on a co-design and co-creation model, with representatives of the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector having a core role.
3. The development of national principles for wildlife in emergencies include the specification of governance mechanisms, systems, processes, and resourcing. Developed guidelines are transparent and clear on at what stages of an emergency they are activated.
4. National principles for wildlife in emergencies support the cross-border deployment of the wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector during emergencies, reflecting the arbitrary nature of borders for wildlife, disasters, and disaster resilience.
5. National principles for wildlife in emergencies include clear and transparent governance mechanisms and decision making to ensure timely access to emergency grounds, reflecting that rapid deployment leads to better outcomes for wildlife, communities and first responders.
6. Governments at all levels develop mechanisms to support the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector to continue to provide an important community service. Such support recognises the ongoing work of the sector at significant avoided cost to all governments.
7. Government support include clear, specific and targeted funding to support the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector and wildlife veterinary professionals for disaster events and emergency response to improve capabilities.

Yours sincerely,

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