



Inquiry into the 2026 summer fires across Victoria

Submission of the Australian Veterinary Association Ltd
April 2026

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About the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA)

The AVA is the peak professional body representing veterinary professionals and students across Australia. For more than 100 years we have been the united voice of the veterinary profession.

Veterinarians are among Australia's most trusted and respected professionals, dedicated to safeguarding animal health and welfare and supporting the communities they live in.

Our vision and purpose

Vision A thriving veterinary profession

Purpose Building a vibrant future for veterinary professionals.

At the AVA we champion the veterinary community, advance professional excellence, foster connectivity, and deliver exceptional member experiences to achieve our vision of a thriving profession.

Essential role of the veterinary profession

Veterinary services are essential to Australia's animal health, food security, and economy. They help secure Australia's animal health and livestock supply chain, protecting hundreds of thousands of jobs and easing cost of living pressures through a safe and reliable food supply.

Beyond agriculture, veterinarians support companion animals and their owners, strengthening the human-animal bond and promoting the associated mental and physical health benefits of pet ownership. Animals are not just a part of the Australian way of life; they are deeply embedded in it - socially, culturally, environmentally, and economically, and veterinarians are an essential part of every vibrant Australian community.

Veterinarians play a pivotal role in maintaining the social licence of animal industries, ensuring animal health and welfare meets community expectations. Like human healthcare and education, veterinary services provide both private benefits to individuals and critical public benefits to society, in areas like biosecurity surveillance, wildlife treatment and health and emergency animal disease management.

Recognised among Australia's most ethical and trusted professionals, veterinarians are highly respected and trusted members of their communities. The Governance Institute of Australia's 2023 Ethics Index ranked veterinarians among the nation's top 10 ethical occupations¹.

¹ Governance Institute 2023 (<https://governanceinstitute.com.au/app/uploads/2023/11/2023-ethics-index-report.pdf>)



Introduction

The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the [Inquiry into the 2026 summer fires across Victoria](#).

Disasters pose significant threats not only to human lives but also to animals, both domestic and wild. It's essential to urgently address animal welfare needs following a disaster such as bushfires to prevent prolonged suffering.

Veterinarians and veterinary nurses play a pivotal role in disaster response by treating disaster affected animals and assessing those requiring urgent veterinary care, including making informed decisions on humane euthanasia for severely injured animals where necessary, to ensure animal welfare needs are met

With approximately 73% of households in Australia own pets², and Australian farms have an estimated 100 million³ cattle and sheep livestock, the scale of animals potentially affected in disasters is substantial. This amplifies the importance of a well-coordinated and supported veterinary disaster response.

AVA Policies and Documents

The [AVA's Policy Advisory Council \(PAC\)](#) develops the scientific, technical, ethical and philosophical policies of the AVA. These policies are developed through extensive member consultation and wherever possible are underpinned by evidence from the scientific literature. The policies represent the consensus view of AVA members on a range of issues of importance to the veterinary profession.

The following AVA policies relating to disasters are relevant to this Inquiry and should be considered as part of its deliberations:

- [The role of veterinarians in emergency animal management](#)
- [AVA Statement of principles – animal welfare and ethics](#)
- [Euthanasia](#)
- [Euthanasia of injured wildlife](#)

Summary of AVA Recommendations

The AVA recommends to the Inquiry:

1. The AVA recommends DEECA undertake, in consultation with the AVA and relevant stakeholders such as veterinarians in bushfire impacted areas, a post-disaster review of veterinary surge, engagement and funding support arrangements to strengthen, streamline and expedite the mobilisation, coordination, deployment and financial support of veterinarians during disasters.
2. That Victoria adopts activation-ready veterinary engagement and funding arrangements similar to those operating in New South Wales, enabling the immediate mobilisation and support of veterinarians during disasters to deliver timely treatment, humane euthanasia where required, and coordinated animal welfare disaster responses.

² Animal Medicines Australia, A national survey of pets and people 2025

<https://animalmedicinesaustralia.org.au/resources/pets-in-australia-a-national-survey-of-pets-and-people-3/>

³ <https://www.mla.com.au/>



3. That Victoria establishes clear operational arrangements within disaster response frameworks to prioritise and expedite the delivery of essential veterinary medications and supplies into disaster-impacted areas. These arrangements should enable rapid coordination through incident management structures, address transport and access barriers, and support veterinary practices during the critical first days and weeks of a disaster to ensure timely animal treatment and reduce unnecessary suffering.
4. Victoria ensures future bushfire responses consistently apply the Victorian Animal Welfare in Emergencies Plan and relevant animal welfare legislation, with veterinarians prioritised for animal welfare assessment and humane euthanasia, and any non-veterinary destruction limited with clear protocols, competency requirements and oversight.
5. Victoria provides disaster resilience funding to implement practical measures that would improve animal welfare during future bushfires.
6. That Victoria requires an animal impact reporting framework within disaster assessments and official situation reports, including data on livestock, companion animal and wildlife injuries, deaths, displacement and veterinary assistance needs. This data should be collected and publicly reported to better inform response coordination, resource allocation, recovery funding and future preparedness planning.

Discussion

The following matters are respectfully raised for the Inquiry's consideration, as key issues relevant to improving preparedness, response, recovery, and animal welfare outcomes during future fire emergencies.

Victorian Emergency Animal Welfare Plan

The [Victorian Emergency Animal Welfare Plan](#) provides the framework for responding to animal welfare emergency needs in Victoria. The plan includes details for animal welfare support services such as animal welfare assessment, veterinary treatment, and humane destruction, and also the role of the AVA.

The AVA supported the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) bushfire response efforts, including participation in the Victorian Emergency Animal Welfare Committee (VEAWC) and Wildlife Welfare Communications Working Group (CWG).

AVA Support During the Bushfires

The AVA supported veterinarians responding to the summer bushfire events in Victoria. This support included:

- Point of Contact for Disaster Response Agencies - The AVA provided a point of contact to facilitate communication between veterinarians and Victorian disaster response agencies. This role supported:
 - The distribution of information to veterinarians
 - An escalation pathway for veterinarians to raise veterinary/animal issues, operational challenges, or specific needs with Victorian Disaster Response Operations
 - Veterinarians were encouraged to contact the AVA with any concerns, feedback, or requests for assistance related to Victorian bushfire response and recovery efforts.



- Veterinary Resources for Bushfire Impacted Animals - The AVA has a range of resources available for veterinarians to assist in managing and treating animals impacted by bushfires. These can be accessed at: <https://www.ava.com.au/policy-advocacy/natural-disasters/bushfire-resources/>
- AVA Communications to Veterinarians - The AVA distributed and facilitated communications to veterinarians via several channels, including direct emails, AVA Victorian Division Newsletters, AVA social media, and created a WhatsApp for all veterinarians involved in the Victorian bushfires to share updates, ask questions, coordinate assistance, and exchange relevant information.
- Mental Health Support - Natural disasters can take a significant toll on the mental health of veterinarians and their clients. The AVA promoted the following support services to veterinarians:
 - AVA's free and confidential telephone counselling service can be accessed by AVA members and their immediate families, along with any veterinary professionals that work for an AVA member vet (even if they are not members themselves). The service is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. [Visit this link for further information.](#)
 - Communities impacted by natural disasters often experience mental anguish and veterinarians are frequently among the first points of human contact for clients following a disaster event. The Australian Red Cross provides Psychological First Aid guide and training resources for disaster responders. These early interactions can be critical, and the guidance offers simple, practical strategies that can assist veterinarians to recognise distress and provide appropriate support to disaster-affected clients. Guide: <https://www.redcross.org.au/globalassets/cms/first-aid/psych-first-aid-booklet-lq.pdf> and Training: <https://firstaid.redcross.org.au/psychological-first-aid/>
 - Converge International provides a suite of downloadable mental health resources for extreme weather events. [Download here.](#)
- AVA Veterinary Benevolent Fund - The AVA Veterinary Benevolent Fund exists to help any veterinary professional, AVA member or not, going through financial hardship or a difficult time, including impacts from the Victorian bushfires.

Veterinary Support Arrangements and Future Improvements

The AVA acknowledges the extraordinary and catastrophic nature of the Victorian bushfires in the summer of 2026, which may have exceeded the scale and operational assumptions of existing emergency response arrangements and, in some instances, gone beyond current government surge arrangements and the intent of established emergency response plans.

We recognise that DEECA coordinated the veterinary surge workforce for the bushfire response across livestock and wildlife through established mechanisms, including:

- [Emergency Animal Disease \(EAD\) response arrangements](#), engaging veterinarians already registered and enlisting additional veterinarians willing to support the response; and
- Activation of the [Wildlife Emergency Support Network](#) (WESN).



However, the AVA has received feedback from veterinarians that there are challenges with the prompt engagement and deployment of veterinarians under these arrangements. This includes reports from veterinarians who are registered and available to assist but were not connected into the bushfire response early enough, as well as veterinarians working in bushfire-impacted areas who are seeking additional assistance but are not being linked with veterinarians offering support through these official surge pathways.

The AVA would welcome the opportunity to work with the Victorian Government in a post-disaster debrief to identify opportunities to strengthen, streamline and expedite veterinary engagement and surge arrangements. This will be critical to improving veterinary preparedness and response capacity for future large-scale disasters and widespread emergency animal disease events, where timely veterinary involvement is essential to animal welfare, biosecurity and community recovery.

1. Recommendation:

The AVA recommends DEECA undertake, in consultation with the AVA and relevant stakeholders such as veterinarians in bushfire impacted areas, a post-disaster review of veterinary surge, engagement and funding support arrangements to strengthen, streamline and expedite the mobilisation, coordination, deployment and financial support of veterinarians during disasters.

Funding for Veterinary Services

Whilst it is the responsibility of owners to care for their animals in times of disasters, often assistance is needed to ensure animal welfare needs are met, regardless of an owner's financial capacity.

The Victorian Government covers the cost of veterinary services delivered by DEECA as part of its response and relief activities, including veterinarians engaged through DEECA's [Emergency Animal Disease \(EAD\) Veterinary pool](#) or [Wildlife Emergency Support Network \(WESN\)](#).

In some situations, DEECA will engage local veterinarians to undertake in clinic triage of wildlife brought in by the Wildlife Field Assessment Teams. This usually occurs where there are low numbers of animals, or in the early stages of a response. Where these wildlife services are requested by the Incident, the veterinarian will be paid for their services. In addition, if DEECA becomes aware of burnt wildlife being placed with a wildlife rehabilitator, the initial veterinary assessment of those animals may be paid for through the incident.

Impacted landholders who are eligible for the [Victorian Primary Producer Bushfire Recovery Grants of \\$75,000](#) could claim the cost of veterinary services required for the immediate treatment and care of livestock affected by the bushfires. This includes the assessment and treatment of injured or sick livestock, the provision of nutritional or medical regimes for recovery, and euthanasia.

The AVA acknowledges and appreciates the funding support provided in Victoria through veterinarians engaged by DEECA during disaster responses, as well as assistance made available to primary producers. These measures are valuable and play an important role in supporting animal welfare outcomes.

However, there remains a need for activation-ready funding arrangements that enable veterinary assistance to commence immediately following a disaster, rather than waiting days



for departmental engagement processes or producer assistance programs to be established. Animal welfare needs are immediate in disasters, with injured animals often requiring urgent veterinary treatment or humane euthanasia without delay.

Pre-established veterinary engagement and funding mechanisms should be in place to support veterinarians in disaster impacted affected regions to respond as soon as an event occurs. This would help ensure animals do not endure prolonged suffering while administrative arrangements are being finalised.

A practical example exists in New South Wales, where the NSW Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development (DPIRD) Agricultural & Animal Services Functional Area (AASFA) provides direct funding support for private veterinarians in disaster-affected areas to facilitate immediate treatment of livestock and companion animals. These arrangements are response-ready and [can be promoted ahead of forecasted disaster events](#) or [activated immediately once disaster impacts emerge](#).

The NSW arrangements provide clear and well understood guidelines for veterinarians that provide rapid veterinary mobilisation, and enable a coordinated response through the Department's Incident Management Team and the NSW Animal and Agriculture Emergency Hotline. Most importantly, they ensure veterinary care is available when it is needed most and reduce unnecessary animal suffering. For more information, please read the [NSW Guide for Emergency Animal Treatment during NSW Floods for Privates Veterinarians](#).

The AVA is aware of several veterinary clinics that provided emergency veterinary care to bushfire-impacted animals, including treatment and euthanasia, using their own staff time, medications, and consumables at no cost to owners. While this reflects the profession's strong commitment to animal welfare, it places a significant and unsustainable financial burden on individual veterinary clinics during an already challenging period.

For veterinary professionals, ambiguity around the Victorian engagement and funding arrangements can result in significant financial and operational challenges. For animal owners, the confusion can exacerbate the stress and anxiety already associated with disaster events. Ultimately, for the animals affected by these disasters, the consequence could be a delay in receiving essential care, potentially resulting in prolonged suffering.

2. Recommendation:

That Victoria adopts activation-ready veterinary engagement and funding arrangements similar to those operating in New South Wales, enabling the immediate mobilisation and support of veterinarians during disasters to deliver timely treatment, humane euthanasia where required, and coordinated animal welfare disaster responses.

Expediting Veterinary Supplies into Disaster Impacted Areas

The AVA is aware that veterinary practices in bushfire-impacted areas of Victoria provided significant immediate care to affected animals. This placed heavy pressure on local stocks of medications, fluids, dressings and other essential veterinary supplies, with some practices depleting supplies within the first few days of the response. Road closures and transport disruptions exacerbated the shortages with delaying resupply.



Timely access to veterinary supplies is critical during disasters. Delays in obtaining essential items such as pain relief, antibiotics, wound care products and euthanasia agents can prolong animal suffering and limit the ability of veterinarians to respond.

The AVA advocates for clear arrangements within Victorian disaster response frameworks to prioritise and expedite veterinary supplies into disaster-impacted areas, particularly during the first days and weeks of an emergency when demand is highest.

A practical example occurred during the 2025 and 2026 floods in Queensland, where the Queensland Department of Primary Industries assisted veterinary practices experiencing shortages by providing logistic solutions within QLD disaster response arrangements helping source and urgently deliver essential veterinary medications and supplies into flood affected regions.

Embedding similar arrangements in Victoria would strengthen disaster responses and help ensure animals receive timely veterinary care.

3. Recommendation:

That Victoria establishes clear operational arrangements within disaster response frameworks to prioritise and expedite the delivery of essential veterinary medications and supplies into disaster-impacted areas. These arrangements should enable rapid coordination through incident management structures, address transport and access barriers, and support veterinary practices during the critical first days and weeks of a disaster to ensure timely animal treatment and reduce unnecessary suffering.

Humane Destruction of Bushfire Injured Animals

During the first few days of the Victorians summer bushfires the AVA received reports from concerned veterinarians across multiple locations that the Victorian *Animal Welfare in Emergencies Plan* and relevant legislation were not being followed regarding the engagement and role of veterinarians, and the humane destruction of animals.

Reports advised that broadscale shooting of animals was being encouraged with little or no veterinary involvement or oversight in welfare assessments and treatment options considered. Issues include that any persons with a gun licence are being encouraged to shoot bushfire impacted animals but without them having the appropriate skills and animal welfare knowledge and, in some reported cases, using unsuitable ammunition. This approach raises serious animal welfare concerns and is inconsistent with established emergency animal welfare arrangements.

At the same time, the AVA was aware of a significant number of veterinarians who had formally identified themselves through DEECA arrangements as willing and available to assist in the bushfire response but were not being immediately engaged through existing coordination mechanisms. While the AVA recognises the critical need to avoid delays in euthanasia that may prolong animal suffering, uncoordinated shooting by individuals holding firearms licences, particularly where they lack appropriate animal welfare expertise, rather than enabling suitably skilled veterinarians to undertake welfare assessments and humane destruction, does not represent an appropriate approach to emergency animal welfare.

4. Recommendation:



Victoria ensures future bushfire responses consistently apply the Victorian Animal Welfare in Emergencies Plan and relevant animal welfare legislation, with veterinarians prioritised for animal welfare assessment and humane euthanasia, and any non-veterinary destruction limited with clear protocols, competency requirements and oversight.

Disaster Resilience Funding to Improve Animal Welfare Outcomes:

The AVA advocates for disaster resilience funding to improve animal welfare outcomes, including targeted support for primary producers to implement resilience and betterment measures that strengthen animal welfare in future bushfire events. For example, this could include the establishment of bushfire refuge paddocks or safer holding areas with low fuel loads, and reliable water access, enabling livestock to be moved quickly to safer locations during bushfire emergencies and supported there for several days if required.

5. Recommendation:

Victoria provides disaster resilience funding to implement practical measures that would improve animal welfare during future bushfires.

Animal Disaster Impact Reporting

Current disaster reporting frequently does not account for the wide-ranging and devastating effects on animals, including livestock, companion animals, and wildlife, by omitting comprehensive statistics on animal injuries and fatalities.

The lack of animal disaster impact reporting does not change their requirements for veterinary attention. This oversight in disaster reporting contributes to a systemic underestimation of the impacts on animals, leading to deficient government and public awareness, and consequently, insufficient support.

While occasional disaster assessments do acknowledge the effects on animals, these instances are sporadic and lack a standardised approach. For instance:

- The loss of 11,000 farm animals in the 2009 Victorian Black Saturday fires.
- During the 2019-20 bushfires, thousands of New South Wales farms endured significant livestock losses, with over 11,000 animals sheltered at evacuation centres and animal safe places. The widespread devastation of these fires led to nearly 3 billion native animals being impacted across Australia.
- In the 2021 Western Australia Wooroloo Bushfire, over 100 veterinarians and nurses dedicated six days to identify, assess, and care for affected animals alongside search and rescue officers.
- The 2022 New South Wales Northern Rivers Floods resulted in 3,403 calls to the NSW Agriculture and Animal Services hotline, with 2,011 requests for assistance.

The above examples demonstrate the profound effect disasters can have on animal populations, yet such figures are not consistently included in official disaster impact reports. This lack of recognition hinders our collective understanding of the full scope of disaster impacts and the associated support requirements.

The AVA is calling for all Victorian disaster impact reporting to include data on animal injuries and deaths. Such animal welfare information would provide a more accurate reflection of the disaster's impacts, thereby prompting a more suitable funding and response from government, veterinarians and the public.



6. Recommendation

That Victoria requires an animal impact reporting framework within disaster assessments and official situation reports, including data on livestock, companion animal and wildlife injuries, deaths, displacement and veterinary assistance needs. This data should be collected and publicly reported to better inform response coordination, resource allocation, recovery funding and future preparedness planning.

Public Awareness

The AVA highlights the critical role that public awareness plays in ensuring animal welfare during disasters. There is a pressing need for increased public awareness campaigns specifically tailored towards animal disaster preparedness and response activities.

Preparedness is the first line of defence against the detrimental effects of disasters. By Governments investing in public awareness campaigns, we can equip livestock and pet owners with the knowledge and tools needed to safeguard their animals' wellbeing.

Such campaigns should focus on educating the public about the importance of creating disaster plans that include their animals, the value of microchipping and tagging for identification, evacuation arrangements, and knowledge what to do if their animal is injured or dies from the disaster.

Additionally, wildlife is often injured in disaster situations. A public awareness campaign could help highlight the role citizens can play in protecting local wildlife, including understanding how to respond if they come across an injured wild animal in a disaster response.

These measures can greatly assist in the event of a disaster and significantly reduce the pressures on emergency and veterinary services.

The AVA believes well promoted and expanded public awareness campaign will not only enhance the overall readiness of our community in times of disasters but also go a long way towards ensuring the welfare of domestic, commercial and wild animals.

Contact

AVA Advocacy Team

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