



WILDLIFE  
INFORMATION  
RESCUE AND  
EDUCATION  
SERVICE

# **Response to questions on notice: Inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales**

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**Submitted to:**

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## Introduction

NSW Wildlife Information and Rescue Service Inc (WIRES) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the question on notice, provided by the Hon. Greg Donnelly. The question was put to Matt French, Head of Wildlife Welfare with WIRES, whilst they were giving evidence during hearings for the *Inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales* on 29 August 2023:

The transcript of the hearing records the Hon. Greg Donnelly's question as

I'll start off with what's called a question on notice that you can take away and return an answer to in due course. The Australian Veterinary Association in its submission No. 144 made 16 recommendations. I invite you, on notice, to have a look at that submission and the recommendations and, if you can, come back with your thoughts about any particular ones that you think have some merit.

WIRES notes that the Hon. Greg Donnelly's question on notice is very similar to one provided in other sessions by the Hon. Peter Primrose's, recorded during the opening session as:

I am going to ask the same question to every witness today, and that is, the Australian Veterinary Association, in their submission, has given us 16 recommendations. I am just asking if you could please take those on notice. Any that you strongly agree with or strongly disagree with, could you just let us know? I would be interested in your views on their recommendations. Apropos of a conversation with Ms Boyd, I would be interested particularly in your comments on recommendation 10, and that is:

The NSW Government commits funding to develop and implement a framework that provides regulatory and appropriate financial support to the provision of veterinary services for lost, stray and homeless animals, injured wildlife and during emergency situations provided by all sectors of the profession (charities and the private veterinary sector).

I'm just wondering if anyone has any comments on that.

This report responds to the Hon. Greg Donnelly and the Hon. Peter Primrose's question on notice, and directly addresses Recommendation 10 included in the Australian Veterinary Association's (AVA) submission to the *Inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales*. The question of notice highlights an awareness amongst the Inquiry Committee that the provision of care for sick and injured wildlife by veterinary professionals requires specific consideration, as do the services of the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector. As Australia's largest wildlife rescue organisation, WIRES is well placed to provide further detail and continue to assist the Committee in developing their recommendations.



## 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 operating in NSW. In addition, we have 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 12,900 rescues since October 2020.

WIRES trains hundreds of rescuers and carers annually across Australia, 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 in this sector is estimated to save the government, at a minimum, approximately \$27 million per annum and is growing.<sup>1</sup>

WIRES has developed partnerships and programs and provides forward-thinking national support to hundreds of projects which aim to see protected and listed species' populations increase through 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.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Planning, Industry and Environment (2020) *NSW Volunteer Wildlife Rehabilitation Sector Strategy 2020-2023*, NSW Government.



## Australian Veterinary Association Recommendation 10

The AVA submission to the *Inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales* included 16 recommendations. Recommendation 10 is reproduced here:

The NSW Government commits funding to develop and implement a framework that provides regulatory and appropriate financial support to the provision of veterinary services for lost, stray and homeless animals, injured wildlife and during emergency situations provided by all sectors of the profession (charities and the private veterinary sector).

Implicit in this recommendation is that both veterinary practices and the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector provide an essential service for our wildlife and community. They provide a public service and a social good largely at the expense of the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector and the professionals who support them. Those who provide rescue and rehabilitation services overwhelmingly feel that they, and the wildlife they care for, are underappreciated by government.<sup>2</sup>

The Hon. Greg Donnelly and the Hon. Peter Primrose's question on notice, with particular emphasis on recommendation 10, reflects the broader context of discussion during the hearing on the need to ensure that wildlife rescue and rehabilitation services continue in NSW, and that a framework that provides appropriate incentives for veterinary practices and sustainable funding for wildlife rehabilitators be developed.

### An unmet need for financial support

The volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector, with the support of veterinary practices, provide a critical service to wildlife and public good for the people of New South Wales. As an unfunded community service, these services are reliant on donations and represent an avoided cost to the NSW government.<sup>3</sup> An overwhelming number of the more than 100,000 wildlife calls responded to by WIRES would not survive without the rescue and rehabilitation service provided.

WIRES works with more than 500 veterinary practices across the state. Alongside the limited government support for the wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector, the shared workload of

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<sup>2</sup> Englefield, B., Candy, S., Starling, M. & McGreevy, P. (2019). The Demography and Practice of Australians Caring for Native Wildlife and the Psychological, Physical and Financial Effects of Rescue, Rehabilitation and Release of Wildlife on the Welfare of Carers, *Animals* 9(12), 1127.

<sup>3</sup> WIRES (2023). *Submission to the Statutory Review of the Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016 (NSW)*, NSW Parliament.



veterinary practices who provide pro-bono services has supported the treatment of wildlife for decades. Providing services for sick and injured wildlife without charge is a critical need throughout the state. When sick and injured wildlife are taken to a veterinary practice, treatment and alleviation of pain can't be dependent on a person's ability to pay. Any reduction – or perception in reduction – in the availability of pro-bono veterinary services would lead to poor welfare outcomes for wildlife.

Recent pressures have led to veterinary practices charging for treatment or declining to treat wildlife, increasing the risk of poor outcomes. These changes are indicative of the financial challenges faced by veterinary practices and the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector, and – importantly – the welfare impacts for wildlife.

The recently released final report of the Ken Henry-led *Independent Review of the Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016* specifically referenced that “providing care to sick and injured wildlife comes at a great financial and emotional cost to professional service providers and volunteers” and is “likely to prove unsustainable”. The emotional cost, in part, is linked to often-catastrophic injuries to wildlife and a higher euthanasia rate compared to domesticated species.

Reflecting the challenges faced by veterinary practices and the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector they support, recommendation 46 of the Henry-led report calls on the NSW government to “consider funding models to support vets and volunteers, including wildlife hospitals, and accredited specialist rehabilitation facilities.”<sup>4</sup> This committee is well placed to consider and recommend what form these incentives might take, including tax breaks and other financial outlays. These incentives should reflect both the public service and social good the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector and veterinary practices provide to the communities they serve, and the ongoing and significant savings to government as an avoided cost.

With the number of sick and injured wildlife requiring rescue and rehabilitation continuing to grow, government action is needed now.<sup>5</sup> The ongoing, debilitating and increasing impacts of habitat destruction and fragmentation throughout the state goes to the core of the AVA recommendation 10. There is a clear need for a funding framework that includes appropriate incentives for the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector, veterinary practices, and specialist wildlife hospitals to continue to provide wildlife triage and treatment, and to have the necessary facilities to provide safe and effective medical care. With increasing public awareness of the biodiversity and extinction crisis, and the impacts of a changing climate on habitat and species, broader public demands for government action will grow louder.

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<sup>4</sup> Henry (2023) *Independent Review of the Biodiversity Conservation Act – Final Report*, NSW Government, p. 35

<sup>5</sup> See Table 2, page 14. OEH (2019) *Review of the NSW Volunteer Wildlife Rehabilitation Sector: an evidence base for guiding reform*, Office of Environment and Heritage, NSW Government.



Incentives for veterinary practices are discussed across (1) support for rescue, treatment, and rehabilitation services (2) provision of education, training, and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) centred on Australia's unique wildlife, and (3) wildlife-safe facilities, wildlife hospitals, and accredited specialist rehabilitation operations.

### **Rescue, treatment, and rehabilitation services**

At the core of the AVA recommendation 10 is the development and implementation of a framework that provides appropriate financial incentives for veterinary professionals and the volunteer rescue and rehabilitation sector. The WIRES submission to the *Inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales* provided direct detail of underestimated costs of providing rescue and rehabilitation services, citing government data.<sup>6</sup> A survey conducted by the NSW Office of Environment and Heritage estimated the direct annual financial costs incurred by veterinary practices and staff. With 86% of practices providing free assessment of wildlife and 90% providing euthanasia without charge, there is an estimated minimum economic value of \$1.8 million.<sup>7</sup> This figure sits in addition to an estimated minimum saving to government of \$43 million (based on a 2017 estimate of \$27 million<sup>8</sup>) via the services provided by the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector.

The current avoided cost approach is not sustainable, does not reflect public expectations, and outcomes will worsen if the government fails to develop a framework and provide appropriate support for veterinary practices and the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector. The Henry-led *Independent Review of the Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016* is clear on the unsustainability of the current approach, and limited government support.

A government framework must be designed around providing incentives for veterinary practices to provide triage and treatment for sick and injured wildlife, and ensuring sustainable funding and support for the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector to ensure these operations and their services continue to exist throughout the state.

### **Education, training, and Continuing Professional Development (CPD)**

Providing funding for wildlife-specific training for veterinary professionals is essential for an effective and sustainable sector that has the capability to respond effectively to wildlife

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<sup>6</sup> Office of Environment and Heritage (2018). Review of the NSW volunteer fauna rehabilitation sector. Unpublished draft discussion paper, NSW Office of Environment and Heritage, Sydney NSW.

<sup>7</sup> DPIE (2020). *NSW Volunteer Wildlife Rehabilitation Sector Strategy 2020-2023*, Department of Planning, Industry and Environment, NSW Government.

<sup>8</sup> Haering, R., Wilson, H., Zhuo, A. & Stathis, P. (2018). Towards a more effective model of local wildlife care with the volunteer wildlife rehabilitation sector, Australian Wildlife Rehabilitation Proceedings.



emergencies and disasters. Evidence presented at hearings during the *Inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales* highlighted that funding support to undertake training is an important component of ensuring adequate skills for the treatment of wildlife.

An identified need for wildlife-specific competencies in the veterinary sector was outlined in the WIRES submission to the *Inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales*, alongside the broader implications in terms of confidence across the sector and amongst the public:

a self-assessment survey designed and facilitated by the New South Wales Government found that only 40% of veterinary practices 'strongly agreed' that they understood wildlife triage and treatment, and only 47% considered the professional services they were able to provide for wildlife to be of a high standard.<sup>9</sup> These responses correlate with a survey of wildlife rescue and rehabilitation volunteers, which found that only 50% considered that their local veterinary practice understood wildlife triage and treatment protocols.<sup>10</sup>

Government support for CPD alongside changes to veterinary education programs (from certificate through to degree and higher degree level) to include wildlife triage and treatment will improve outcomes for wildlife and further support the veterinary sector. Funding models to increase the accessibility of CPD will send a clear message that the NSW government recognises the value of the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector and the veterinary practices who care for our wildlife.

### **Wildlife-safe veterinary practices, wildlife hospitals, and accredited specialist rehabilitation operations**

The overwhelming majority of veterinary care provided to sick and injured wildlife is undertaken by veterinary practices, with more than 500 veterinary professionals offering triage and treatment for animals rescued by WIRES. Alongside financial incentives for the provision of triage and treatment services (see *Rescue, treatment, and rehabilitation services*, above), support for veterinary practices to develop safe spaces for the triage and treatment of wildlife is an essential component of a funding model for wildlife care facilities across NSW.

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<sup>9</sup> Haering, R., Wilson, H., Zhuo, A. & Stathis, P. (2021). A survey of veterinary professionals about their interactions with free-living native animals and the volunteer wildlife rehabilitation sector in New South Wales, Australia, *Australian Zoologist* 41(2) 254-282.

<sup>10</sup> Haering, R., Wilson, H., Zhuo, A. & Stathis, P. (2018). Towards a more effective model of local wildlife care with the volunteer wildlife rehabilitation sector, *Australian Wildlife Rehabilitation Proceedings*.





WIRES submission to the *Inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales* specifically noted an ongoing challenge in ensuring safe and effective care in veterinary practices:

Wildlife are often exposed to long wait times and left unattended in boxes/carriers for extended periods before receiving assessment, triage and treatment. This is exacerbated by the nature of injuries, routinely requiring pain relief, and leading to further suffering.

An additional concern is that many practices do not have and cannot afford to set aside separate spaces specifically designed to provide safe spaces for wildlife. An outcome is that wildlife can be co-located with domestic animals (i.e., cats and dogs) which can further increase psychological stress and lead to poor recovery outcomes.

A need for dedicated spaces and specialist equipment to provide care and improve outcomes for wildlife is illustrated in the above excerpt. A lack of dedicated infrastructure, resources and equipment in veterinary practices were specifically identified in the AVA submission.<sup>11</sup> Safe treatment and accommodation spaces for wildlife in veterinary practices are required in addition to and separate from, funding for dedicated wildlife hospitals and accredited specialist rehabilitation operations – reflecting the invaluable service and public good provided by veterinary practices for wildlife across the state. Supporting specialist services will also increase capacity to triage and treat wildlife.

Financial support for veterinary practices to establish safe treatment and accommodation spaces for wildlife will enable significant improvements in the short term, ensuring ongoing availability at multiple locations across NSW.

Wildlife hospitals and accredited specialist rehabilitation operations, with a sustainable and cost-effective funding model that is not reliant on donations, will provide additional capacity to treat sick and injured wildlife. These facilities can be specifically located to reflect general and species-specific demand, and proactively planned in the context of the ongoing impacts of (1) habitat destruction and fragmentation, and (2) climate change impacts on habitat on current populations, their responsive movements to heat stress, and translocated populations.

Funding for wildlife hospitals and accredited specialist rehabilitation operations will contribute to addressing current wildlife welfare issues and the increasing pressures on veterinary practices. The benefits of wildlife hospitals and accredited specialist rehabilitation operations are localised and must not be seen as a panacea. Veterinary practices will continue to provide triage and treatment for large numbers of sick and injured wildlife throughout the state.

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<sup>11</sup> See page 47 of the AVA submission to the *Inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales*.



Recommendation 46 of the Henry-led *Independent Review of the Biodiversity Conservation Act* calls on the NSW Government to fund accredited wildlife hospitals, practices and the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector for the costs incurred in providing care for wildlife.<sup>12</sup>

This recommendation directly reflects key components of the WIRES submission to the *Inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales* and the AVA recommendation 10.

The Henry-led review recommendation reflects the public good provided by the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector and private veterinary practices who treat wildlife, and importantly the pressing need to develop a framework to ensure the sector is sustainable.

A funding commitment and ongoing government support are essential for veterinary practices, wildlife hospitals and accredited specialist rehabilitation facilities to be sustainable and support rescue, rehabilitation and release of wildlife. These facilities provide staff an essential service, social and public good, and are highly valued in the communities they support – akin to other emergency responders – despite being underfunded by government at all levels.

Business as usual will lead to poor welfare outcomes for our precious wildlife, ongoing risks to the sector, and significantly increase the immediate cost burden on the NSW Government.

## Conclusion

The question on notice put to Matt French, WIRES Head of Wildlife Welfare, by the Hon. Greg Donnelly during hearings for the *Inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales* has provided NSW Wildlife Information and Rescue Service Inc an opportunity to directly respond to (primarily) recommendation 10 of the AVA submission.

In this response to the Hon. Greg Donnelly question, WIRES has further emphasised elements of our original submission including that there is an unmet need for financial support from government across the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector, and the veterinary professionals who provide services for our unique wildlife across NSW. A commitment to financial incentives and other funding is required to ensure essential services can continue to be provided, and a sustainable framework is developed.

WIRES' response has identified three areas in which funding is needed to ensure the sustainability of the sector, reduce the emotional and financial burden on veterinary practices

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<sup>12</sup> Henry (2023) *Independent Review of the Biodiversity Conservation Act – Final Report*, NSW Government, p. 35



and importantly improve outcomes for wildlife. These three areas are (1) support for rescue, treatment, and rehabilitation services (2) provision of education, training, and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) centred on wildlife, and (3) wildlife-safe facilities, wildlife hospitals, and accredited specialist rehabilitation operations.

Developing a framework for government funding is essential to ensure positive outcomes for wildlife and a broader public good, more-so given the increasing impacts of the biodiversity and extinction crisis.

Yours sincerely,

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