

**INQUIRY INTO RESPONSE TO MAJOR FLOODING  
ACROSS NEW SOUTH WALES IN 2022**

**Name:** Dr Philippa Johnston

**Date Received:** 15 May 2022

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Partially  
Confidential

15<sup>th</sup> March 2022

To the Director, NSW Legislative Council's Select Committee on the Response to Major Flooding across New South Wales in 2022,

My name is Dr Philippa Johnston (BVSc, Hons 1), a senior veterinarian at Tenterfield Veterinary Clinic, previous owner of Tenterfield Veterinary Clinic and previous employee of Northern Rivers Veterinary Services at Casino.

During the period 6<sup>th</sup> March 2022 – 14<sup>th</sup> March 2022, I was the full time volunteer team leader of the privately managed Central Veterinary Command (CVC) at Primex, Casino, NSW.

I will be addressing all the terms of reference, except for (e) the implementation of recommendations from inquiries into previous natural disasters – I am unable to comment on this as I have not researched this adequately.

In regards to the flood related veterinary response, one of the options for private veterinarians to volunteer their assistance was to register with Vets Beyond Borders (VBB), who in turn were contracted under Animal Welfare League (AWL), who in turn were contracted under LLS, who in turn were contracted under DPI and AASFA. This convoluted pathway was a hindrance to the efficiency of providing immediate, emergency veterinary care to the animals in the field. There was no involvement of our national veterinary body, the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA). The overall support, guidance and information provided directly from LLS and DPI to private veterinarians in the initial 10 days post flood was minimal.

I registered with VBB as a volunteer veterinarian and arrived at Primex, Casino on Friday 4 March 2022 (5 days post flood), to meet the AWL team in their mobile truck. I met local veterinarian, Dr Bruno Ross, and agreed we would work together in this emergency situation. Dr Ross already had 2 privately funded helicopters assisting in the surveillance of the area and providing aerial fodder drops to stranded stock.

The AWL mobile truck was set up as a small animal treating base, with minimal provisions for large animal field treatment, which was the main requirement in the emergency stage in that area. After reporting to AWL, I travelled to Coraki to treat 10+ severely affected horses.

The following day (Saturday 5 March), Dr Ross organised a privately funded helicopter to deliver me to a drop point on the Coraki – Woodburn Rd and to then travel via privately owned boats to Woodburn Bridge for further veterinary treatment of horses and cattle. 6 days post flood and this was the first veterinary attention these animals had received.

LLS helicopters for aerial fodder drops did not arrive until Saturday afternoon (6 days post flood). Due to weather clearing, fodder drop helicopters were able to be in the air from at least Wednesday 2 March and/or Thursday 3 March 2022 and fodder drops could have been provided 3 days earlier than they were. This early provision of fodder needs to be addressed in a timely manner to increase the survivability of flood affected stock.

By Saturday evening, there were multiple private veterinarians independently in the field with a complete lack of overall organisation and subsequently animals were being repeatedly visited and treated, with severe risk to already compromised animal health. With the assistance of Dr Ross and Dr Oliver Liyou, we formed the Central Veterinary Command (CVC) at Primex, Casino where all veterinary flood related emergency requests would be dealt with. The aim was to provide a coordinated approach to the veterinary care of animals in the field, with the assistance of 2 privately funded helicopters, and to optimise the volunteer veterinarians we had available.

#### Central Veterinary Command:

- Meeting at AWL truck Sunday morning 6 March 2022 – private volunteer veterinarians and 2 LLS veterinarians present. It was decided that CVC would take on the responsibility of funding the private helicopters and agreed to continue to utilise their services as we were unaware of any other consistent aerial surveillance being conducted.
- 2 helicopters were sent for aerial grid surveillance, in order to accurately gain overall information on the flood situation (we had not received any update from LLS on surveillance situation).
- Over the next 7 days, we had 15+ veterinarians volunteer through our services and they were sent via privately funded modes of transport (car, boat and helicopter) to provide veterinary assistance as required.
- In regards to the delay in provision of fodder to stranded stock - CVC was advised by multiple LLS veterinarians that the situation was not urgent and 'it takes well over a week for an animal to starve to death'. This statement is a concern in regards to animal welfare (Appendix A. Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Regulation 2012, NSW, Part 5 Enforcement Section 27) and a public concern.
- Wednesday 9 March 2022 – meeting with Dougall Saunders (Minister for Ag, NSW), Mike Veitch (Shadow Minister for Ag), James Jooste (Chief of Staff Ag Minister), Scott Hansen (Chief DPI), (DPI) and (LLS general manager). Further air assistance was offered by Scott Hansen, however when requested it could not be provided in a timely manner or for surveillance purposes. We subsequently organised a private helicopter to perform final aerial surveillance due to continued reports of cattle still stranded and fodder not provided.
- Wednesday 9 March – RSPCA had not been mobilised. After reporting this directly to the Ag Minister, 2 RSPCA teams were in the field 2 days later. They were limited however as they were not permitted to travel in LLS helicopters.
- 10 March 2022 - CVC received confirmation that the private helicopters we had utilised would be funded by DPI.
- 16 March 2022 – discussion with local ranger team leader at Richmond Valley Council, and they still had not been mobilised. They have invaluable local knowledge of the area and at least, could have assisted in identification of deceased animals.

#### **Summary of Concerns:**

There appeared to be an inability by government organisations to evaluate the full scope of the emergency and initiate appropriate level of response, or at least to communicate this to those in the field. We even had an inability to access a hardcopy map from LLS for aerial planning.

There was a lack of repeated and methodical government air surveillance in relation to identifying animals in need of attention (fodder or veterinary) and lack of communication of this surveillance to other organisations. The first update and communication CVC received from LCC regarding ongoing aerial surveillance was 12 March 2022.

It became evident that LLS had a complete reliance on the 1800 number in the initial 10 days.

Livestock owners were experiencing a number of difficulties with this process:

- Owners completely unaware of the 1800 number
- Owners had minimal (if any) phone service in the field
- Owners were unable to even locate their stock due to inability to access areas or stock washed away
- Owners reported requests for fodder logged and no fodder and / or no further communication were received
- Owners did not realise they were required to re-log for further fodder drops and that there was often a 24-48hr time delay between registering and fodder drops occurring
- There was a delay in the provision of veterinary attention when compared with owners ringing CVC directly – owners had to ring 1800 number and log job, then the LLS vet was contacted and they were then to call CVC to request veterinary assistance

It is undeniable that many stranded and stressed stock's clinical condition deteriorated even further due to the delay in fodder and fresh water provision.

There was a lack of immediate mobilisation of appropriate organisations - eg RSPCA, local council.

There was a complete lack of formalised identification (ID) process for deceased animals – this leads to difficulty with insurance claims and also owners cannot get closure in an already stressful situation. It is unacceptable for this process to be left to the responsibility of the contractors burying the bodies. Local council rangers have the expertise and equipment to adequately scan animals for microchips and NLIS tags.

It appeared that the issue of stray stock in the emergency phase was left to the responsibility of local stock and station agents. Tick inspectors in the field in the first 10 days were minimal in number and in many cases, experienced mustering horses and stock dogs were required for safe, efficient handling of stray stock.

LLS veterinarians are typically not 'treating veterinarians', ie they are not up to date with current medical treatment of cases and they do not have required equipment to treat livestock in the field. They cannot be expected to fill this role in an emergency situation.

CVC had a complete reliance on local volunteers and privately funded resources for information and transportation. It was incredibly difficult to get any assistance, cooperation or clear direction from government organisations and individuals involved until (CVC) contacted State Emergency Coordinator, on 10 March 2022.

In summary, we had a situation where private veterinarians, with minimal to no training in emergency disasters or management, were placed in a situation where they had to provide animals with immediate veterinary attention, food and fresh water provision, as well as attempting to navigate the government bureaucratic hierarchy.

### **Recommendations**

- To prioritise animal welfare in the emergency phase; obviously after human safety and survivability has been addressed. Provision of fodder and fresh water to surviving stock in a timely manner (within 72 hours, if possible).
- Repeated, methodical, competent and livestock experienced government air surveillance and daily mapping of the emergency situation in the initial stage with sharing of this data to other organisations involved.
- Mobilisation of relevant organisations in immediate emergency phase (within 24-48hrs of event), such as SES, RFS, DPI, LLS, AVA, AVL, RSPCA. Representatives from each organisation to meet within 24-48hrs of emergency event.
- Open communication between government organisations, other relevant groups and local people - eg veterinarians, landholders, local council and volunteer groups already active in area. Free flow of information between agencies is crucial to enable the best outcome for all people and animals affected.
- The maximum recommended period for animals without food in an emergency situation is 72 hours (as per Appendix A - Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Regulation Act 2012 NSW Part 5 Enforcement Section 27) - this needs to be reiterated with all LLS veterinarians.
- Experienced mustering teams mobilised in emergency phase for safe and efficient handling of stray stock.
- In emergency situations where road access is not possible, a RSPCA officer and a veterinarian in the helicopter to make animal welfare decisions.
- DPI expressed a concern that they were not legally allowed to perform aerial fodder drops without prior permission from property owner and owner of stock. In this emergency situation, where owners and stock were not necessarily united, it was not always possible for the owner to give prior permission, and animal welfare should come first. In order to deal with this situation, there could be a question on the LLS Annual Return "Do you authorise DPI to provide animal fodder and fresh water in the case of an emergency?"

### **Recommendations in regards to a coordinated veterinary response:**

This should be discussed further with AVA, AVL and VBB. (VBB) reported that the veterinary response to the WA fires worked well (coordinated directly between VBB and DPI).

- Direct involvement of the Australian Veterinary Association with AVA liaison officer to be appointed.
- In the event of an emergency, AVA to contact all local veterinarians immediately to determine if affected and / or capacity to assist, as well as the scope of the emergency to their knowledge. Offer immediate coordinated support.

- Work with VBB to have updated and clinically relevant list of volunteers that are suitable for the disaster experienced and the animals affected.
- Support local clinics that have been affected - financially, emotionally and physically.
- Design a humane and efficient animal euthanasia protocol in the field when areas are still isolated (minimal lethobarb to be used in field as carcasses may not be disposed of in appropriate or timely manner)
- Requirement of identification of live animals (eg ID accurately, tag in mane for treated animals) and deceased animals (eg. eq microchip IDs, cattle NLIS tags, cattle ear tags, cattle ear marks, eq and cattle markings and brands).
- Protocol for ongoing treatment eg. Refer back to normal veterinarian for continued treatment.

I would be prepared to give evidence at a hearing if required.

Thankyou for your time.

Kind regards,

Philippa Johnston

BVSc.

## **Appendix A.**

In regards to the provision of food to animals, the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Regulation 2012 (NSW) (POCTA) Part 5, section 27 states:

### **Part 5 Enforcement**

#### **27 Evidence that ruminant stock – animal – not provided with food or shelter during emergency** (cf clause 5 2006 reg)

*For the purposes of Section 8(3) of the Act, the period prescribed in respect of a ruminant stock – animal – is 72 hours during any period of drought, flood or other emergency.*